

The 2nd Sunday After Epiphany: Holy Trinity Church: January 16, 2022

John 2: 1-11:

Jesus save the Best Till Last

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

The Jews have always attached great importance to the high moments of life. So, a wedding was not just a brief ceremony, but an experience to be shared by the entire community. The typical wedding feast could last up to seven days. That sounds strange to our modern way of thinking, but this offered a bright interlude in an otherwise dreary existence. The ceremony would begin on Tuesday at midnight. After the wedding the father of the bride would take his daughter to every house so that everyone might congratulate her. It was a community experience. Weddings were a time of joy.

Years ago, when Johnny Carson was the host of The Tonight Show he interviewed an eight-year-old boy. The young man was asked to appear because he had rescued two friends in a coalmine outside his hometown in West Virginia. As Johnny questioned the boy, it became apparent to him and the audience that the young man was a Christian. So, Johnny asked him if he attended Sunday school. When the boy said he did Johnny inquired, "What are you learning in Sunday school?" "Last week," came his reply, "our lesson was about when Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine." The audience roared, but Johnny tried to keep a straight face. Then he said, "And what did you learn from that story?" The boy squirmed in his chair. It was apparent he hadn't thought about this. But then he lifted his face and said, "If you're going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!" The little boy was on to something. Weddings are a time of Joy.

At the wedding, which Jesus attended in Cana of Galilee, there was great joy, but a problem developed. There was a shortage of wine. Not only was that a social embarrassment, it was also a symbol. For a wedding to run out of wine was an omen that there was little chance of this marriage reaching its full potential, maybe joy was not meant for this couple.

So, Mary approaches Jesus and asks him to do something. His response? "Why do you involve me woman?" Sounds harsh, so unlike Jesus, and it has long puzzled

biblical scholars. But you must look at this scene in its historical context. Jesus, at this moment, had not performed a single miracle. He was thirty years old and had just gathered together his disciples. He knows that if he performs a miracle, a clock will start ticking and it will not stop until he gets to Calvary. Crowds will flock; investigators will be dispatched. Is this the appropriate moment? He concludes that it is, everything seems to be in place, so he makes his move and gives his first public sign that he is different; he transforms water into wine. It is a crucial moment for Jesus and the disciples.

First, let's look at the miraculous sign. It was a custom in that time to serve the best wine first and the lesser at the end of a celebration. Now let's be honest. We are not talking about taste. The "best wine" contained the higher percentage of alcohol. It takes time to ferment wine and time is money. So, when this fermented wine is presented to the master of the banquet near the end of the festivities he is impressed. The earlier wine had been good, but this was even better.

But this was not the miracle. The miracle was known only to a few: the disciples and the servants who brought the water in, and, it seems, to Mary who knew about it even before Jesus. Turning the water into wine has long been viewed as one of Jesus' more unique miracles. Poor planning has caused this wedding to grind to a halt. Mary asks Jesus to resolve the issue. It is an imposition on her son, but

sometimes mothers are used to imposing upon their children. Jesus is not pleased, “What has this to do with me. I am not the caterer.”

My sisters and brothers, it makes you wonder if Mary knew Jesus could whip up a batch of wine at will or whether she simply expected him to go out and get some. I tend to think she knew. Mary, like many mothers both before and after her, will not tolerate her child’s lack of concern. Mary knows, and Joseph have brought up Jesus better than he is behaving. There is no debate, there is no discussion; she does not remind Jesus of his manners. But, Mary sets the scene, so that Jesus must act, he must do the right thing. At Cana, Mary was the mother, and Jesus was the son, and sometimes that is just the way the world works. She knew he possessed powers. That he could perform a miracle. The scriptures say this was the first of his miraculous signs. I think this was his first public miracle. Can you and I think of a time when our mothers helped us to do the right thing? Me too!

At this crucial moment, the beginning of his ministry, a second thing is done. His Glory is revealed. It is remarkable that Jesus chose to start his ministry with this miracle. By all measures it is not one of the more flamboyant. It wasn’t on the scale of parting the Red Sea and crushing the Egyptian army. It certainly isn’t as verifiable as raising Lazarus from the dead. In no way is it as public as the feeding of the 5000. The servants and the disciples seem to be the only ones who know. In

the end, Jesus' first miracle, the one that lets us know that the Messiah has arrived, simply corrects a bit of poor planning on the part of the wedding caterer.

It's almost anticlimactic. The story ends in this way: In this, the first of his miraculous signs, he revealed his glory. Why this one? Why not a more theatrical sign? It is because this miracle defines Jesus' ministry. It is not packed with persuasive power; it is rather, driven by humble acts of service.

Phillip Yancey in his book "The Jesus I Never Knew" describes it this way: the wine came from huge thirty-gallon jugs that stood full of water at the front of the house, vessels that were used by observant Jews to fulfill the rules on ceremonial washing. Even a wedding feast had to honor the burdensome rituals of cleansing. Jesus, perhaps with a twinkle in his eye, transformed those jugs, ponderous symbols of the old way, into wineskins, harbingers of the new. From purified water of the Pharisees came the choice new wine of a whole new era. The time for ritual cleansing had passed; the time for celebration had begun...Prophets like John the Baptist preached judgment. Jesus' first miracle, though, was one of tender mercy. Remarkable isn't it? That His glory is revealed in this simple act. It is a small gesture made more remarkable because of whom it is. The master of the banquet being eloquent served by the Master of All Things. It is a crucial moment. And in

this moment three critical things are set in motion. First, a miracle is performed. Second, Jesus' glory is revealed. And third, for the disciples, their faith is begun.

Let me ask you my sisters and brothers: Why do the disciples put their faith in Jesus? Is it simply the miracle? You must remember they have only been with him a few days. They have seen no proof that he is anything else but a teacher and only heard a bit of his teaching? Is it the miracle that wins their devotion or something else? It seems to me that the miracle is part of it but not all of it. Something else is at work here.

Think of the history of Israel. How long had they been around? Currently in history they have been around as a tribe and a nation for close to 2000 years. Think of all the things they been through: The beginnings in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Joseph and the hundreds of years of slavery in Egypt. Moses and the Exodus. The wandering in the wilderness and the giving of the Law. Joshua and the conquest of the promise land. The years of tribal wars to gain possession of the land. The rise of the Kings: Saul, David, and Solomon. The work of the prophets. The civil war and division of the Kingdom. The Babylonian captivity. The return from captivity and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Then Alexander the Great and the Hellenization of the world began 300 years before Christ. The Jewish nation never gained independence again.

It is into this world that Jesus steps. It is the world of Jesus' disciples. It is a Greek world. And their little region is now part of Rome. In a word: the nation's wine has run out. God seems to have abandoned Israel. The disciples along with the nation have lost hope. What are you going to do when the wine runs out?

Let me tell you a rather bleak and tragic story about Earnest Hemmingway a Nobel Prize author known for his book "The Old Man and The Sea." Hemingway is my favorite author. You have three characters in the book: The old man, the fish he caught and lashed to the boat, and the sharks that devour the fish. They fight each other. Hemingway was a person who went for it all. A newspaper reporter, ambulance driver during WWII, involved in the Spanish Civil War, friend to bullfighters as well as authors--he did it all. And, when he did it he did it to the fullest. In a manner of speaking he enjoyed the wine of life. But there came a day when the wine ran out.

Carlos Baker records it in his biography of Hemmingway in this way: Sunday morning dawned bright and cloudless. Ernest awoke early as always. He put on the red "Emperor's robe" and padded softly down the padded stairway. The early sunlight lay in pools on the living room floor. He had noticed that the guns were locked up in the basement, but the keys, as he well knew, were on the window ledge above the kitchen sink. He tiptoed down the basement stairs and unlocked

the storage room. It smelled as dank as a grave. He chose a double-barreled shotgun with a tight choke. He had used it for years to shoot pigeons. He took some shells from one of the boxes in the storage room, closed and locked the door, and climbed the basement stairs. If he saw the bright day outside, it did not deter him. He crossed the living room to the front foyer, a shrine-like entryway five feet by seven feet, with oak-paneled walls and a floor of linoleum tile. He slipped in two shells, lowered the gun butt carefully to the floor, leaned forward, pressed the twin barrels and shot himself.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, it happens in our own lives. The wine runs out. We become strangers to ourselves and we have nowhere to go. What are you going to do when the wine runs out? It is a sad truth that we usually don't come to God until we have a need. Jesus was not approached until there was an emergency. We are the same way. We pray. We usually come when we have a need. I am not saying that this is right or even desirable. I am simply saying that it is a fact of life that religion for most people is a 911 affair. Mary came to Jesus when the wine jars were empty. You will come too, but not before you are drained, and exhausted, and when life's unpredictable demands bring you to your wit's end.

The disciples put their faith in Jesus not solely because of a miracle, turning the water into wine, but because the nation of Israel, the people of God were ready.

The Nation's wine was gone. The disciples saw in Jesus new wine, a new way, a new teaching. Who knows! Perhaps even he could be the Messiah. Jesus changed water into wine, but soon he was to transform their ordinary lives into a new exhilaration.

I want you to carefully listen to this poem. I suppose at one time or another we have all heard Myra Brooks Welch's poem "The Touch of the Master's Hand." It is one of my favorites.

'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin, but he held it up with a smile.

What am I bid, good folks, he cried, who will start bidding for me?

A dollar, a dollar, then two, only two? And two dollars who'll make it three.

Going for three, but no... From the room far back, a gray-haired man came
forward and picked up the bow

Then, wiping the dust from the old violin, and tightening the loose strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet, as sweet as the angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer, with a voice that was quiet and low,
Now, what am I bid for the old violin, and he held it up with the bow.

A thousand dollars, who'll make it two? Two thousand and who'll make it three;
Three thousand once, three thousand twice, and going, and going, and gone

The people cheered, but some of them cried, we do not quite understand.

What changed its worth? --Swift came, the reply, the touch of the master's hand.

He touches the wedding and lifts it not just with the miracle but also by his presence. He takes this ordinary wedding and he transforms into that which is extraordinary. He takes a fisherman by the name of Peter and transforms him into the great preacher of Christendom. He takes a studious, but quite insecure young clergyman by the name of John Wesley and uses him as the litmus for one of the world's great revivals. He takes a young frail and frightened girl by the name of Teresa from Albania and transforms her into a Pulitzer Prize of Peace by the name of Mother Teresa. He takes that which is ordinary and transforms it.

My sisters and Brothers, here is challenge for this week and our lives. Everyone else serves the cheap wine near the end but Jesus saves the best till last. The lesson was not lost on the disciples who joined him at the wedding that night in Cana.

Don't let it be lost on you! AMEN!