

## Epiphany 2C 2019 Sermon

### *John 2:1-11*

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*

As many of you know, when it comes to John's Gospel, what we read often means *one* thing on the surface, and *another* thing (or things) **beneath** the surface. John delights in using metaphors and symbols and multi-layered meanings. We see the stark difference between *John's* Gospel and the other three Gospels in the very way John **begins** his Gospel. Rather than starting with Jesus' birth or with John the Baptist, as the other Gospels do, John starts his Gospel before the creation of the world: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us..."<sup>1</sup>

The Word which created the world, the Word which *is* **God**, becomes flesh and lives among us. And this central doctrine of Christianity – that God became flesh – is key to understanding today's Gospel story.

Jesus, his mother, and his disciples are at a wedding party – which in itself, is deeply symbolic. What does a wedding symbolize? Fr. John Shea writes: "On the surface level, a wedding is an event where two... become one in order to create a third. Weddings are about human love that co-creates human life."<sup>2</sup> (unquote) But as I just mentioned, John, in his Gospel, often wants his readers to see meaning at a level *beneath* the surface. "On the depth level," Fr. Shea explains, "a wedding... symbolizes the relationship between the divine and the human... how God and people are united in love to co-create **spiritual** life."<sup>3</sup>

Now, you and I know that popular piety in many corners of the Christian Church down through the centuries has gravitated toward Mary, Jesus' mother, as someone who seems more approachable – more human, like us – than Jesus,

whom many Christians have seen mainly in his divine, rather than his human, nature. Christians with this perspective think that they can bring their very human concerns to Mary, who will understand, and will then intercede on their behalf with her divine son. And this is what is happening in today's Gospel story when Mary brings other people's needs to Jesus' attention, saying, "They have no wine." Fr. Shea writes: "The mother of Jesus is the spokesperson for the *people* side of this divine-human relationship. She is humanity aware of its lack, conscious that it cannot live to the fullest without continual communion with God. So she speaks to Jesus, the God side of the divine-human relationship, the haunting and poignant words of all human insufficiency: 'They have no wine.'"<sup>4</sup>

Now, given the Gospel-writer John's penchant for multi-layered meanings, we should expect that the statement, "They have no wine," means *more* than "they have no [actual] wine." In the Old Testament, wine often symbolizes life in its fullness. For instance, there is a passage in Isaiah that is a vision of the promised fullness of life that God wants for all people. Isaiah writes: "On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear." (Is. 25:6) For Mary to say, "They have no wine," is to say that God's intended fullness of life is wanting; that the perennial human condition suffers from lack and need, and especially the *spiritual* need for God. "Humans have lost their union with God," writes Fr. Shea, "and, by implication, their communion with one another. Without this *spiritual* union [between human and God] the wedding of life *cannot* continue."<sup>5</sup> Without our union with God in heart, soul, mind, and strength we will not know the fullness of life that God desires for all of us.

Mary is but the first of many people who come to Jesus expressing deep human lack, for throughout John's Gospel, people bring to Jesus their deep needs. *Something* is missing in their lives, and they look to Jesus to fill that deficiency, that emptiness. A royal official will beg Jesus, "come down before my little boy dies" (John 4:49). A man who has been lame for 36 years will describe his helplessness to Jesus, saying, "I have no one to put me into the pool" (John 5:7). In the face of overwhelming numbers of hungry people, the disciple Philip will realize the **scarcity** of both bread and money, saying to Jesus, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little" (John 6:7)... Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus about their brother, "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (John 11:3). "These statements combine to create a chorus of human afflictions," writes Fr. Shea. "They are the cries of finitude—illness, lameness, blindness, hunger, and death. In short, the human condition is so jeopardized that people cannot celebrate [life in its fullness]. They have no wine."<sup>7</sup>

My friends, we can see it all around *us*, also. A member of the parish will come up to me and say, "Please pray for my son; he was just diagnosed with cancer" – or "he is an alcoholic," or "he just lost his job," or "he is getting a divorce," and on and on. Every week, people come into the church office with deep human lack

or need: “I just lost three friends last month,” one of these said to me recently, “and my bike broke down so I couldn’t get to work and I lost my job. I try to follow God’s Law; why is this happening to me?” A bright, hardworking young single mom recently told me, “I was laid off, and haven’t been able to find another job. I can’t pay my rent, and if I don’t get it paid this week, my two kids and I will be evicted. I’ve been in my apartment for 13 years, paying my rent all that time! I’ve gone to Loaves and Fishes and the Council of Governments, but they’re out of money.”

All of these people are saying, in one way or another, “We have no wine” – wine being that symbol of life in its fullness, life at its deepest meaning; life as God intends. It’s not just their physical, tangible needs that people bring; they are hurting in their souls, too: feeling defeated, or worthless; depressed, desperate, worn down, alone, unloved. And they bring those needs to the church, which the New Testament calls the “bride” of Christ. Indeed, our Prayer Book marriage ceremony states that marriage “signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church.” (p. 423) The **need** for this spiritual union between Christ and us is what today’s Gospel, at its core, is all about. Jesus comes to fill this need, as he will say later in John’s Gospel: “I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

In responding to his mother’s statement, “They have no wine,” Jesus asks, “What has [their lack of wine] to do with you and me?” Though she offers no direct verbal response, Mary **knows** that the answer is: “*Everything.*” Their lack of wine has everything to do with her and her son. “The very reason for Jesus’ being,” writes Fr. Shea, “is to supply wine for the imperiled marriage of divine and human life... Jesus’ glory is to bring divine abundance into the world of human lack. The incarnate love of God is geared to prevent perishing. ‘For God so loved the **world** that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.’”<sup>9</sup> Life in its fullness. In fact, the abundance of God’s spirit-infused wine fills 6 water jars, each holding 20 or 30 gallons: a total of 120 to 180 *gallons* of wine! Such is the abundance of God’s grace, God’s mercy, God’s love.

Three last points: First, notice that Jesus does not perform the miracle without human involvement: human beings are employed to fill the 6 jars with water – no small task! For any stone jar that could hold 30 gallons would be way too heavy to carry, so water had to be drawn from a well, a bucket at a time, and taken to where the jars were standing. God uses us human beings to do God’s work; **we** are part of the miracle: God’s Spirit flowing through us in order to accomplish God’s purposes. Praying for a loved one’s healing is important; but God still uses the skills of human doctors and nurses to bring about that healing. As St. Paul says in today’s Epistle, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Cor. 12:7)

Secondly, John ends this story by saying that this was the first of Jesus' "signs." John doesn't call it a "miracle," for he doesn't want to draw attention to the miraculous nature of turning water into wine; he wants to draw attention to what that act, that sign, points to: Jesus' glory, which is to bring divine spirit into union with human life.

Finally, notice that when the servants bring the water-turned-to wine to the steward of the feast, the steward attributes the fine wine to the generosity of the bridegroom, not to God. How often do you and I attribute the good things that come to our lives to some human cause, while being blind to the grace, the mercy, the divine love which God is continually pouring into this world at every moment of every day?

In our Psalm today, we read, "Oh God! your people... feast upon the abundance of your house; you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the well of life..."<sup>10</sup> All of our lacks and needs, all of our cries of "We have no wine!" are answered as we turn to God and drink deeply from his love and grace, and we are filled.

AMEN

1 John 1:1, 14

2 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 20

3 *ibid.*

4 *ibid.*, pp. 20-21

5 *ibid.*, p. 21

6 *ibid.*

7 *ibid.*

8 *ibid.*

9 *ibid.*

10 Psalm 36:7-9