

Epiphany 2C 2022 Sermon

January 16, 2022

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.

Today, we are back in John's Gospel; which means we are once again in the realm of multi-layered meaning and symbolism, where there is always more meaning in the story than what we see at first glance. In today's Gospel, we will need to look not only at the *surface* level of the story, but also at the deeper, symbolic, and *spiritual* level.

Jesus, his mother (Mary), and his disciples are at a wedding feast when it comes to Mary's attention that the wine has run out. Now, on the surface level, the level of social interaction and one's reputation in the eyes of society, this is a *crisis*. Sociologists Malina and Rohrbaugh write that in ancient times, "Wedding celebrations were of immense significance as public demonstrations of family honor... To run out of food or wine at a wedding involved a serious loss of family honor."¹ And in the honor/shame-based society of Jesus's day, the shame to the family if wine were to run out at a wedding feast might have been so severe that the family name, the family honor could *never* be restored. On this surface level of the Gospel story, then, the level of societal honor and family reputation, this is a crisis. *They have no wine.*

Now, in the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian churches down through the centuries, Mary, Jesus' mother, has, at times, seemed more approachable, more human, than Jesus, whom many Christians (unfortunately) have seen almost exclusively in his *divine*, rather than his *human*, nature. Christians with this perspective believe that they can bring their very human concerns to the very

human Mary, who will understand and empathize, and will intercede on their behalf with her divine son.

Theologian John Shea believes that 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.*" Dr. Shea notes that, just as the wedding of a man and a woman can co-create *physical* life – a baby, so "the wedding [in our Gospel story] symbolizes how God and people are united in love to co-create *spiritual* life

"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, [who symbolizes] the God side of the divine-human relationship; [she speaks] the haunting and poignant words of all human insufficiency: '*They have no wine.*'"² They have no wine.

Now, in the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament), wine often symbolizes life in its fullness. In the Book of Amos, we read, "The time is surely coming, says the LORD, when... the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it." (Amos 9:13) And 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 well-aged wines strained clear." (Is. 25:6) Thus, for Mary to say, "*They have no wine,*" is to say, on the symbolic and spiritual level, that the fullness of life that God intends for all people is lacking; the human condition suffers from want and need, including the *spiritual* need for God. *Especially* the spiritual need for God! "Humans have lost their union with God," writes John Shea, "and, by implication, their communion with one another. Without this *spiritual* union the wedding of life *cannot* continue."³ Without the *spiritual* union between God and us, the wedding of life cannot continue.

Now, Mary is only the first of *many* people in John's Gospel who come to Jesus expressing deep human lack; for throughout the 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.

And, my friends, we can see that emptiness, that deficiency, that hunger and longing for fullness of life all around *us*, also. A member of our 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." *They have no wine.* Almost every week, some person calls me with a deep human need: "I don't have any gas in my car, and without gas I can't get to my job;" or "If I don't find the money to pay my rent by Friday, my children and I will be without a home." *They have no wine.* We all read about the Marshall Fire outside of Boulder: over 1000 homes and buildings burned; families having their houses and all their possessions literally go up in smoke. They have no place to live. *They have no wine.* Nurses and doctors are getting burned out by the deluge of

patients flooding our hospitals, and an unprecedented number of these health care workers say they would like to quit. *They have no wine.*

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?" It's a rhetorical question, for Mary **knows** the answer: "*Everything.*" The lack of wine has **everything** to do with her and her son. "The very reason for Jesus' being," writes John 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."⁴ "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly," Jesus will say later in John's Gospel. (10:10) Jesus comes to bring Life in its fullness. "A feast of well-aged wines," as Isaiah describes it.

In our Gospel story, the overabundance of God's "well-aged wine" fills 6 large water jars, each holding, scholars tell us, about 25 gallons: a total of 150 *gallons* of wine! Such is the abundance of God's grace, God's love within the marriage of divine and human, the Spirit of God dwelling within us.

Two last points: First, notice that Jesus does not perform the miracle without other people's involvement: human beings are engaged to fill the 6 jars with water – no small task! 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 to accomplish God's purposes. When we are joined to God in the divine-human marriage symbolized in our Gospel story, we participate, both individually and together as a church, in the divine flow of love and healing and wholeness which is the very activity of God. You and I take a necessary part in the redemptive healing of the broken marriage between God and this world.

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 sign *points* to: Jesus' glory, which is to bring divine spirit into union with human life.

At the beginning of the Marriage Ceremony in our *Book of Common Prayer*, we read, "The bond and covenant of marriage... signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church..." *That* symbolism is the deep, spiritual meaning of the wedding in today's Gospel. All of our lacks and needs and longings, all of our cries of "We have no wine!" are answered as we are wedded to God in our spirit and soul, and drink deeply from the well-aged wine of his love.

AMEN

1 Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, p. 70

- 2 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 20-21
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 21
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 *Book of Common Prayer*, New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979