

## Don't Leave the Altar

### **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.

When I meet with a couple to help them plan their wedding, I let them know something will go wrong. Something goes wrong at every wedding. Fortunately, it's usually something small: the flower girl dumps all the flower petals in the first two feet of the aisle, or a jet flies overhead at an outdoor wedding, temporarily disrupting the service. But every pastor has a story or two about bigger things that have gone wrong. Like the couple that was trying to light their unity candle, and they set the silk flowers on fire. Or the "small" wedding that on the day of turned out to have 100 guests and was being filmed for French TV. For me personally, the biggest problem I had was when a best man just walked away from the altar in the middle of the ceremony.

Now what happens in today's Scripture story is one of those larger problems. Every culture has their own expectations of weddings. In Jesus' day, the wedding itself was probably just a simple service. But the reception made today's parties look tame. Newlywed couples didn't go away on a honeymoon. Instead, they opened their home for family and friends, and that celebration usually lasted about a week.

You may also remember, in Middle Eastern cultures, hospitality was of tantamount importance. Welcoming the stranger was an expectation. How much more, then, do you think people were expected to care for visiting friends and family? Running out of wine, and on the

first day of the reception, no less, would have been a huge social faux pas. Imagine if you had a small dinner party, and with great flourish put the main dish on the table, declaring it the best cooking you've ever done. When the guests cut into the chicken to find the center still pink and cold, that level of embarrassment and anxiety is what this bride and groom would have felt at not having enough wine.

For some reason, Jesus' mother notices this before disaster strikes. And she asks Jesus to help this couple out. To do something about the situation. And Jesus, the man we think of as so full of compassion for everyone, says, "That's not my problem. It's too bad, but I can't do anything about it." But Jesus' mother knows differently. So she tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them, thus putting the ball in Jesus' court.

Instead of sticking to his guns, maintaining that "it was not his time," Jesus turns water into wine, thus saving the day. But this whole incident is puzzling. After first refusing to do anything, why does Jesus change his mind? And come to think of it, why does Jesus refuse to help in the first place?

Well, Jesus didn't come to 'fix' things. He certainly could have. Besides turning water into wine, Jesus fed a crowd of over 5,000 people. Jesus could have fed everyone in the world. He could have eliminated hunger in his lifetime. But what would that have really solved? Sure, it would have made life immeasurably better for countless people in the ancient world. But what would have happened when Jesus died? People would talk about what a great guy he was, and maybe one or two rich folks would try to carry on with feeding people. But in just a short time, the world would return to its old state. Jesus would have made only a dent in an ongoing problem. That's not what Jesus came for.

Instead, Jesus came to restore the relationship between all people and God. Along the way, he showed compassion when and where he could, but compassion was not his mission. That's why Jesus initially refuses to help at the wedding. He doesn't want to be distracted from his mission. So then why does he change his mind? Why does he go ahead? It seems to me that there must be a lesson in his actions that's about more than saving a wedding. About more than providing food and drink.

Let's look for a moment at how Jesus chooses to do this miracle. He has the servants fill the stone jars for ritual purification with water. According to Jewish tradition, there are specific rituals for washing before eating. A person must wash their hands and face while saying a certain prayer. Food must be washed in a certain way. Plates and cups and... you get the picture. That's why these six large pots were there. It doesn't say so anywhere in the Scriptures, but I'm pretty sure that filling these jars with wine was a religious no-no. If the Pharisees had seen this, they would have been incensed!

Jesus could have had the servants fill anything with water. Why does he choose these jars? Simply because they are nearby? In part, I think it's because of their size. John tells us these jars combined hold 120-180 gallons of water. That makes 600-900 bottles of wine! I figure, if the reception lasts the rest of the week, that's 100-150 bottles a night. No matter how you do the math, Jesus was generous.

Jesus could have provided just enough wine to get by. After all, in the morning, the newlyweds could have gone around town to try to procure more wine. But Jesus provides more than enough to last the rest of the reception. So what's the lesson here? God's grace and love don't come to us in a trickle. We don't have to try to calculate out how much grace should be going to each person. Because God's love is so deep and so wide that it is more than enough.

So one reason Jesus used the ritual jars was because they allowed him to demonstrate the immensity of God's grace. But there's another symbolic reason here too. These jars represent the complex rules and laws the people struggle to keep. We're all familiar with the 10 Commandments, but if you read through the first five books of the Bible, you'll find there are actually 613 separate laws. And then the Pharisees added to those. Keeping up with the law was a difficult task – and a draining one for most people. By filling these jars not with the water of ritual but with the wine of joy, Jesus is saying that life should be more joyful than the laws are allowing.

Think for a moment about the words we say during communion. “Drink from this all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.” One cup of wine represented the new covenant – a covenant built on grace and mercy instead of on laws and rituals. Jesus creates wine, a symbol of the new covenant, in the ritual jars, a symbol of the old covenant. So this part of the lesson won't make sense until later. But the lesson here is that there will be a new covenant to replace the law, and it will bring joy and grace to all people.

So the grace of the new covenant will bring us joy, and it will flow with great abundance. But there's even more here to what Jesus did. Remember the quality of wine he created? Sometimes cultural references in the Bible are lost on us in our modern surroundings. But even today we understand the concept of serving the quality alcohol first, and then when people are tired or drunk, serving the lower-grade stuff. By saving the best for last, Jesus is declaring that goodness and grace are available even to latecomers. Just like in the parable where all the day laborers are paid the same wage, regardless of the length of their shift. God's grace is available in full to everyone – whether you claim it as a child or at the end of a long life.

Moreover, for those who claim that grace when they are younger, God doesn't ever let our "best days" be behind us. God always has something good coming for us. Retired pastor Susan Andrews says it this way:

The promise is this: God saves the best for last. Despite my doubt and impatience, God has indeed proven this promise to be true. If you are like me, you have mourned the passing of each stage of your life—the simplicity of childhood is gone, the beauty of adolescence has faded, the freedom of college is over, the ambition of young adulthood has dwindled, the ardor of marriage has cooled, the exhausting delight of parenting has slowed down, the body is creaky, parents are dying and dead. You know the refrain—the best of life has already passed us by

Except that God keeps surprising us—surprising you and me—with new wine that is sweeter and tastier than that which has become before. Yes, I can't move quite as fast or do quite as much, but the slower pace helps me savor each moment more fully. Yes, there is too much pain and disappointment and failure in the world, but allowing rich emotion to flow honestly through me, makes the beautiful and the lovely all that much more precious. Yes, the day-to-day craziness of car pools and lunches, homework and curfews is over—but the newfound distance gives me the delicious freedom to finally admit that I am not in charge of my children's lives. Yes, the wine is sweeter and the aroma more pleasing the older I get. Such is the generosity of God's amazing grace in our lives.

It's hard to believe that by performing this miracle, Jesus was actually doing this much teaching. Especially given the fact that the guests aren't aware of what's going on. Even the chief steward doesn't know where this wine has come from. Who was paying attention? The disciples. If you look back to what happens just before this story, Jesus is calling the twelve. They've only been with him for a few days. And all they've done in that time is collect more disciples. This wedding reception ends up serving as a crash course for them in what Jesus' true mission is. His mission is to help everyone understand the depth of God's love. To understand that grace is joyful, not legalistic. That grace is abundantly overflowing. And that with grace, something great is always coming next. And though no one knows it yet, eventually Jesus will reveal that the best thing waiting is living with him in God's kingdom in the life yet to come. Amen and amen.