

“An Unexpected Sign”
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Texts: Isaiah 62:1-5
 John 2:1-11

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Jesus, his newfound disciples, his mother, Mary, and presumably a whole bunch of other folks were together at a wedding in Cana.

Did they do “The Macarena”? Or maybe “The Chicken Dance”? Of course, the answer is NO. These are modern wedding dances...but there must have been historical equivalents! ...maybe even ones that made the dancers look just as ridiculous!

It's natural to want to celebrate at weddings, to laugh and clap and dance. It has been that way down through human history. Back in the first century, a wedding celebration was a big deal, every bit as big and probably costly as it is today, probably has always been, perhaps more so...

In Jesus' day it was tradition for a wedding to last an entire week! Seven days was the Jewish custom. That's seven days of feasting, drinking, abstaining from work, and enjoying the company of loved ones, friends and neighbors, all as a way of celebrating and sharing in the new family's joy. Now that is a party, and one has to imagine that it couldn't have come cheap.

Given all this, it makes the dilemma facing the wedding in Cana seem all the more pressing. Having the wine run out was nothing short of a disaster, a social blunder from which one family might not recover.

Wine held deep practical and spiritual significance for Jewish partygoers. Practically, it did what wine does today. It filled the stomach and gladdened the heart. Spiritually, it served as a sign and symbol of the joy and blessing that flow from God's right hand into the hearts and lives of his chosen family (Psalm 104:15; Proverbs 3:10). Without wine -- which was the centerpiece of the feast -- the celebration would no doubt come to a grinding halt, with its absence leaving a bitter taste in the mouths of the guests and shame in the heart of the host.

It's not difficult to picture the exchange leading up to Jesus' miracle!

Mary realizes the problem first. Perhaps she can relate as a hostess who would want to be spared such embarrassment in front of the gathered community. She says to Jesus, "They have no wine." Note that Mary does not ask Jesus to fix the problem. She simply tells her son, "They have no wine." Jesus responds rather flippantly: "What's it to you or me? My hour has not yet come."

TRANSLATION – “So what? Not my problem, and not yours either, Mom.”

But Mary doesn't address her son's response. Rather she turns to the servants and instructs them, "Do whatever he tells you." And then I can imagine Mary walking away, confident her son knows exactly what she expects...and confident that he will remedy the situation! Jesus didn't see that it was the appropriate time to use his heavenly powers. But his mother did – and he ultimately defers to her wisdom.

Seeing the giant stone water jars, kept for the purification rites, Jesus apparently decides that what was not his problem, he will make his problem. "Fill them with water," he instructs the servants, who had been waiting since Mary's direction. The servants follow Jesus' directions and the crisis is averted in a big way...from no wine to six jars with about 25 gallons each. Wine can flow in abundance – 150 gallons of it.

Really good wine – for everyone in attendance, and most will never know there was a problem. Only Mary, Jesus and his disciples and a few servants know a miracle has been perpetrated. The festivities can continue unabated – the party keeps going. Jesus' glory is revealed, sort-of, at least to a few, at least to those who left everything and followed him. It was just the beginning of their adventure with him, just the beginning of what they would witness. This was the inauguration of a whole new celebration. This was Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior of the world...the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

There would be...seemingly more significant miracles: amazing healings, wilderness feedings, demons cast out, even the dead raised...but this first miracle, of wine and wedding, signified a new era...it was a spiritual sign that life is a celebration, to be tangibly and fully enjoyed through Jesus. He had a better use for the great stone jars filled with water for purification rituals. Jesus transforms the water of guilty obligation into the wine of celebration. Can we embrace that truth? Can we let it sink into our understanding of who we are and what God wants for us and for the world?

In scripture, wine and wedding imagery are tied to the hope of eternity. The Prophet Isaiah shares the promise that one day, "...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" (Isaiah 25:6). It's a picture of the heavenly banquet, with the communion of saints gathered round -- a wedding feast to beat all wedding feasts.

This miracle at Cana, water being changed into wine, was an unexpected sign, in no way a conventional way to kick off a ministry. For some, the sign is not only unexpected, but nearly unacceptable. During the era of Prohibition and even after, in some more conservative churches, there were those who were uncomfortable with the secular nature of this sign:

There is this story from Central Texas of a Sunday School teacher named "Miss Lillian" who ended every Sunday School class, then divided by gender, with "Now boys, watch that demon rum." One day the Scripture lesson happened to be this story of Jesus turning the water into wine at Cana. When a more adventurous student asked "Miss Lillian" how one explains that story about Jesus, she replied defiantly: "I don't know how to explain it. But I do know I'd have a lot more respect for him if he hadn't done it." -- Jesus surprises from the very beginning. He has come to save the world, but he takes time to attend a wedding.

Let it remind us that our life's milestones matter to Jesus. Weddings and births, graduations and birthdays, anniversaries, funerals and reunions, special gatherings of family and friends - these are holy occasions. God is surely present, marking the transition, remembering the set-backs, rejoicing in the hard-won progress and enhancing the celebration even when we do not notice Christ's presence or take his contribution for granted. Jesus accompanies us on our life's journey.

Let it also remind us of Jesus' way with us. His actions are not always big, expansive, redemption-of-the-world-type miracles, but smaller ones hidden in the daily exchanges of life, or caught up in our

familiar rituals. What caused him to change his mind at the wedding? Maybe he was moved by his mother's concern or maybe he looked around and decided that he *could* do something...so he *would* do something.

Maybe he thought it helpful for his new followers to know that their intuition about him was well founded. It could be that he thought the servants needed to witness a miracle as they went about their demanding work. Regardless of why, Jesus did act that day in Cana. He intervened in a surprising way that brought joy. Jesus still acts in life-giving, joy-evoking ways. Jesus came to save the world, but he also came for each of us. Sometimes we witness miracles that bolster our faith at just the right moment, we're given a sign, or we see some powerful testimony.

One last thing we learn from this first unexpected sign of Jesus: It shows us that Jesus is not miserly or calculating. He does not seek out the person responsible for the wine. He does not insist on knowing who didn't order enough or who made a mistake. He does not ponder if the hosts are worthy of this fine wine. He does not turn just enough water into just drinkable wine. His generosity is overflowing! Can we receive this as instruction? Can we learn to live and love as Jesus does at Cana and beyond? Will we mimic the grace and generosity of Jesus...in our interactions with strangers, in our conversations with friends, in our relationships, our work and our service?

The poet Alexander Pope captured the elegant simplicity of Jesus' first miracle when he said, "The conscious water saw its Master and blushed." Where Jesus is...good things happen, organically, sometimes we don't even notice the presence of holiness, sometimes we're expecting some other sign!

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