

You Love Me

A sermon based on John 2:1-11

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Dorothy and I received an invitation this week, asking us to spend a summer weekend near Chicago with friends whose wedding we attended twenty-five years ago! In 1976 two of our seminary friends were married in South Dakota, in a wedding that lasted two to three days! The couple invited their friends to a church camp for a weekend, and there we feasted, swam, sang, visited, played volleyball, did dishes together, and on Saturday night, shortly after supper, we scurried to get into a little more than bathing suits and gathered at the beach to witness Joan and Orlando's covenant of love, presided over by another dear friend of ours.

Now, twenty-five years later, it looks like the whole crew will gather again, and while the couple has made clear that this is not to be at their expense, it will be great to celebrate not only the vows they made to each other years ago, but the fulfilment of those vows, capping twenty-five years of love, friendship, companionship, and all those other good things that weddings represent.

Weddings are often opportunities for embarrassment

Weddings are great — great social occasions and times of celebration — but as you know, they are also fertile grounds for embarrassment! A church secretary, trying to save time, used a bulletin file from the last wedding, Tom and Mary's wedding, and, using the "Search and Replace" function on her software, she replaced Tom and Mary's names in the bulletin with Jim and Gretchen! No problem, until the congregation came to reciting the creed where the bulletin read, "I believe in Jesus Christ, ...born of the Virgin Gretchen...." (Paul Larsen)

Embarrassment is also the order of the day in our Gospel text for today. Weddings in New Testament times also lasted for days, which meant that one had to have a good supply of food and wine on hand. In biblical times the hosts provided these amenities, and failure to do so was very embarrassing. And it wouldn't be just a temporary embarrassment; people would remember it for years after. Twenty-five, fifty years later, people would say, "Oh yes! Remember Isaiah and Priscilla's wedding? They ran out of wine after only two days!"

Hospitality was considered a sacred duty in the ancient Near East, and to run out of wine at a wedding was a serious blow to one's social reputation! Nonetheless, that's what happened at the wedding in Cana, and Jesus' mother, no doubt alerted by the whispering and growing embarrassment, realized the festivities were in jeopardy and nudged her son to do something about it. Mary didn't say specifically what she expected Jesus to do, but the impression is left that she expects him to save the bridal couple from humiliation, which he does! Ordering six stone jars to be filled with water, Jesus calls over the head waiter, asks him to sample the liquid, and to the waiter's astonishment, it tastes like wine! Better wine, in fact, than anything that has yet been served! The best wine was usually served first, but this time, the head waiter surmised,

the wily host had saved the best for last! The wedding could go on! The host's reputation for hospitality would remain untarnished.

An embarrassing gospel?

If the wedding party in Cana was almost embarrassed by the scarcity of wine, there are many Christians who are embarrassed by the profusion of wine poured out at this wedding. A Temperance Union member in one church said of this story — of Jesus' turning water into wine — "I know he did it, but I'd have thought a lot more of him if he hadn't."

A decade or two ago the New York Times carried a story about devout commissioners in a rural Georgia county who turned down a request to establish a winery in the county. When their opponents cited the Wedding-in-Cana story, one commissioner said, "Yes, but that was perfect wine," while another commissioner said simply, "I don't know why he did that. It's been an embarrassment to me my whole life."

Of course, when you see the damage alcohol inflicts on marriages and family life, who's to say a critical approach to intemperance isn't a good one? While the Hebrew tradition valued wine — indeed, it was one of the chief products of Israel and Noah was seen as the founder of viticulture — the Old Testament Scriptures also voice caution about immoderate use of wine. In fact, there is a Jewish midrash about Noah and Satan going into business together, and as his part of the vineyard business Satan slaughtered a lamb, and then in succession a lion, a monkey, and a pig, and fertilized the soil with each in turn. Thus, it is said, Satan conveyed to Noah the qualities of wine. If a man drinks one glass, he is as meek as a lamb; if he drinks two glasses, he is boastful and feels as strong as a lion; if he drinks three or four glasses, he behaves like a monkey, dancing around, singing, talking obscenely and not knowing what he is doing; and if he becomes intoxicated, he resembles the pig. (Midrash Tanhuma 58)

Nonetheless John begins his Gospel with a wine-laden wedding, and another group for whom this story is an embarrassment are those for whom the gospel is, by its essence, demanding and severe in nature. The Gospel of John says that this wine incident was the "first" of Jesus' "signs". (John 2:11) In other words, this is an important event, setting the tone for the rest of the Gospel. And that's unfortunate, some Christians think, for the tone set is insufficiently severe! John begins his Gospel by describing Jesus as "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), and insists in this Gospel that "...those who worship (God) must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:24) This is also the Gospel that provides the rallying cry for those who favour the severity of truth, that if "you...know the truth, ...the truth will set you free." (8:32, NIV)

One might expect, then, that John would follow the prophetic tradition, a tradition replete with unrelenting demands for truth and vehement denunciations of falsehood — the tradition of Amos, for example, who said, "They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth." (Amos 5:10)

The Judeo-Christian tradition does issue radical calls to integrity. As a teacher (Rabbi Mendl Kotzker) of generations ago put it, "If two sheets of metal are to be smelted together, they must first be cleansed of all impurities. As long as rust adheres to them, they will not fuse. So long as a heart is impure, it cannot attach itself to God." Christian philosophers like Søren Kierkegaard followed in this tradition, despairing of the human capacity to escape duplicity, let alone embrace truth. Kierkegaard told the Christians of

his day, "The task of an Apostle is to spread Christianity.... My task is to liberate (believers) from the conceit that they are Christians...." (Heschel, *Passion for Truth*, page 150)

It is not without gratitude that I mention the "severists," for their reminder that truth is harsh and demanding may help those of us who blithely bob-bob between good and evil — between falsehood and truth — to bob a little more heartily and determinedly in the direction of truth!

There is little support for the "severists" in John's opening wedding story, however, for this story is dressed, not in sackcloth, but in the vibrant colours of celebration! This story is fed, not by asceticism and withdrawal, but by imbibition and engagement! This story is characterized, not by scarcity of wine, but by an embarrassing abundance of it. The "six stone water jars" Jesus used in this story each held twenty to thirty gallons of water. Each jar, or jug, was large enough to accommodate a human being! Assuming that Jesus turned all the water, up to 180 gallons of it, into wine, the wedding guests went from having no wine at all to having almost enough to swim in! And this after the robust supplies originally laid in for the wedding were depleted.

This text in John, for a wedding story, sure seems to summon up a lot of surliness in people. One commentator said he just doesn't care for the Gospel of John. It's his least favourite Gospel. He says, "I have little tolerance for the absolute certainty of the writer. It is in John that we get Jesus saying things like: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to God except through me.' (John 14:6)" (Jack McKinney) Whereas the Synoptic Gospels describe Jesus as cryptic about his identity, John tries to fill in the gaps. John's like an over-eager Jeopardy player, always jumping in to give the answer, say his critics, while the other Gospel writers are content to let us ferret out our own understanding.

Well, perhaps, but unlike the other Gospels John is much richer in image and metaphor, and those leave a lot of room for interpretation. I like John's introduction to Jesus' public ministry; it's an imaginative one that can trigger our own imagination about Jesus. In fact, I read an article which interprets Jesus in this story acting as a Divine Trickster, a New Testament parallel to the Old Testament Jacob. ("A Tale of Two Weddings: The Divine Trickster in John," by Jennifer K. Berenson Maclean, Assistant Professor of Religion, Roanoke College, originally presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Boston, Massachusetts, November 21, 1999.) It's an intriguing thesis, in spite of the many biblical injunctions against deceitfulness, all the way from the serpent's trickery in Genesis (3:13) to the New Testament warning that we "must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, (or) by their...deceitful scheming. (Ephesians 4:14)

A festive occasion to frame a joyful Jesus?

The inauguration of Jesus' public ministry is portrayed differently by each Gospel writer. Matthew opens with Jesus as a teacher, delivering the Sermon on the Mount. Mark portrays Jesus as the dynamic healer casting out demons and healing the sick. Luke has Jesus returning to his hometown to explain his calling, and while he is not well received his explanation nonetheless sets the tone for the Gospel. John's opening window on Jesus is a unique and an imaginative one, using a festive occasion to frame his story.

It's interesting to try and figure out the focus in this story. Some have suggested that the focus is on Mary, but mention of her drops off after Jesus is called. The wedding couple is the natural focus of a wedding, but in this story they're scarcely mentioned and we don't even know their names! Some have pointed to the important role of the servants, the only ones privy to Jesus' deed; the wedding couple and guests remain oblivious to the transformation, which is all to the good! It may seem quite appropriate that Jesus' sign is first revealed to the least among them — the servants who are preparing and serving the meal — but there is no mention in the text of the servants noticing the transformation. No doubt when the wedding guests complimented the good wine, the servants knew something had happened, but there is no indication in the text of when the transformation took place!

One would expect, of course, that the focus of the story is on Jesus, and indeed, the last verse of the story tells us that "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory...." (2:11) Well one would expect that of a story setting the tone of a Christian Gospel, but it doesn't really give away much about what was revealed. The interesting thing is that while Jesus is mentioned often in the story, all he really did was tell the servants to fill the six stone jars with water. (John 2:7) No mention of Jesus is made in the verses that follow, until John's summary statement at the end.

It is not unusual, I am told, for artists to portray Jesus modestly in their renditions of Jesus' miracles. Central attention is given to others in the picture. ("Focusing on Others' Faith Through Christ's Miracles," by Doug Adams, PSR Professor of Christianity and the Arts) The artists are faithful to the biblical accounts, say scholars, for the gospel stories emphasize Jesus' focus on others and their faith. Whereas in Bible study we often try to locate ourselves in the biblical story, one New Testament professor tells his students, "Some of these stories are not about you; they are about other people. There are other people in the world." (James Breech, cited by Adams) A sign of maturity is to move beyond preoccupation with ourselves and to focus on the needs and gifts of others.

Often when a person is healed in the gospels, Jesus says, "your faith has made you well," (Matthew 9:22, Mark 5:34, and Luke 8:48; Mark 10:52; Luke 17:19), shifting the focus from his action to our faith. While our faith alone rarely possesses such power, it seems customary of Jesus to shift the credit for the event away from himself. Often the miraculous moment in the Gospels is eclipsed by the attention given to the person healed. These stories do not shower reverential attention on Jesus. In the Cana wedding story we see very little of Jesus turning the water into wine; we do see the wine being conveyed to the host and his guests and much ado being made about its superior quality!

John frames Jesus through the camera lens of a wedding photographer, but I think his choice reveals more than an occasion to convey a joyful Jesus? Joy is certainly the appropriate tone for a wedding, and the fact that the story uses vessels normally used for "rites of purification" (John 2:6) to hold new wine suggests a less severe approach to the kingdom of God! The contrast indicates that Jesus is not going to follow in the footsteps of his more severe and legalistic colleagues. The new wine of Jesus' message and presence will prove too potent for some of the old wineskins.

In framing his Gospel, John may have been at pains to distinguish the followers of Jesus from the Pharisees, on the one hand, and the Essenes, on the other. The Essenes, a very severe group who withdrew to the desert and even disdained marriage, would hardly have welcomed a wedding as an introduction to faith.

A covenant occasion to lift up love

I don't think our gospel story is so much about Jesus-as-Trickster, or about a joyful Jesus, a severe Christ, or Jesus' ability to produce a nice Chardonnay. I daresay it's about the covenant relationship of love that is at the heart of every wedding and marriage relationship. This is the Gospel, after all, that tells us that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." (John 3:16) Love was at the core of the incarnation, and that theme, as banal as it may sound, reverberates throughout John's Gospel. It is John that tells us that Jesus loved (11:3) his friend, Lazarus, loved him enough that Lazarus' death caused him to weep (11:35). It is John that refers often to one of the disciples as the disciple "whom Jesus loved". (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20)

Of Jesus John wrote, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." (John 13:1) John describes the relationship of disciple and master in terms of love. "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me..." (John 14:21; also, 14:23-24 and 17:23) Jesus asks us to "abide" in his love. (John 15:9-10)

And of course, it is in John's Gospel that we hear Jesus give us a new commandment. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35) "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (John 15:12-13; also 15:17)

If John introduces Jesus with a wedding as a natural way of introducing the theme central to Jesus' identity and purpose, it is also the way he closes his Gospel. Who can forget the breakfast meeting at the side of the lake when Jesus asks Simon Peter, three times, "Do you love me?" (John 20:15-17) For John and his community it is Jesus' new command of love that gives the Christian community its particular identity and character.

I like John's introduction to Jesus' public ministry, for a wedding comprises the essential elements of Jesus' life and message. Jesus bestowed his blessing on a couple who embarked upon a covenant relationship. And that sign, far more than the cool fermentation trick, is at the heart of the story. Jesus' desire to see people bond together into meaningful relationships makes his presence at this wedding a most appropriate place to begin his ministry. If your whole message is going to be about forming covenants with God and neighbour, why not start with the most tangible illustration of such a relationship. A wedding story makes perfect sense.

Conclusion

The couple in John's wedding story was no doubt a young couple, but like wine, a loving relationship can age well. In a story that is not uncommon, one couple met, fell in love, married, raised a family, and worked hard and sacrificed much to create a caring home. The years passed, the children moved away, and the couple, now elderly, retired to a wonderful little house in Arizona. Their dreams were shattered, however, when the husband was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. The wife struggled as best she could, but finally had to place him in a nursing home.

The years of illness took their toll on her; eventually she was down to 98 pounds and stooped from arthritis. Nevertheless, every day she made the twelve mile trip to the nursing home to feed her husband his midday meal. And every day she would go

through the same routine. "Who's this?" she would ask, lifting a photograph of their daughter from his dresser. He would stare at it, then shake his head. It was the same with pictures of their son and their grandchildren.

She would then lift his hands from the arms of his chair, hold them in both of hers and ask, "Who am I, dear?" At first, he would look confused. Then his face would brighten and he would look like the man with whom she fell in love.

"You love me," he would say.

Most days they would be the only words he would speak. But they were enough. ("The one memory that never dims," Connections, cited by Jerry Fuller)

Of all the spiritual gifts, love is the greatest. When all else is gone, it is the most memorable and enduring.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.