

Sunday, January 17, 2016  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
John 2:1-11

### **An Odd Marriage**

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.” So concludes today’s story from the gospel of John. It’s an episode that happens right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, right at the beginning of John, chapter 2. For the gospel of John it is the first public act of Jesus ministry, a miraculous event that takes place at a marriage celebration: Jesus brings forth finest wine when it’s all run out, and then, the story concludes: “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.” Before we get to that conclusion, though, before we can conclude that, together with his disciples, we need to concede that there are some odd things about this story. There are odd things about what happens at the wedding in Cana.

It is, we must admit, an odd story, this story of Jesus turning water into wine. I have a vague memory of being faintly embarrassed by it when I heard it as a child. I think that embarrassment probably reveals, probably has something to do with, the culture that I was raised in, and with the kind of prim child I was (and probably still am... bit on the prim side). I don’t come from a teetotal-ling family, but neither were my parents particularly drinkers, and they were certainly not wine connoisseurs. In the culture in which I was raised, much of it in small town Minnesota, there was a bit of unease about excess, worry about words like “partiers.” And here Jesus is, at party. So maybe there was some unease about that, but I think my embarrassment also had something to do with the oddness of the story. Here Jesus is, at a party, with partiers, and the people there have a problem, a drinking problem, as it were, but not the kind of problem in which people are drinking too much. The problem is that they don’t have enough to drink! And so the Son of God, is enlisted in solving that problem.

There’s the oddness, too, of how Jesus is enlisted. By his mother. We actually hear about her first in the story. Before we hear about Jesus, in this, his first public act, before Jesus is mentioned in this story, we hear that his mother is there. As a matter of fact, in this particular gospel, this is the first mention of the mother of Jesus. In the gospel of John there are no infancy or childhood stories of Jesus, no stories of how his mother conceived him or where she gave birth to him, or how she was presented with gifts for him from travelers from the East, or how a twelve year old Jesus had her worried sick when she couldn’t find him for three days because he was in the Temple—those stories are all from other gospels. In the gospel of John, the wedding at Cana is the first story that makes note of the mother of Jesus. She is mentioned in a story that takes place when Jesus is already an adult, when he is embarking on his mission, followed by the disciples whom he has spent much of the previous chapter, John one, calling. After days of that, in John 2, Jesus and his disciples go to a party, and his mother is there. And at the party his mother sees that there is a problem, and she goes and tells Jesus about it: “They have no wine.”

Now, we don’t know why Jesus and his mother were at the wedding. We don’t know what relationship Jesus and his mother might have had with the couple getting married. Were they old neighbors? Distant relatives? Acquaintances from the synagogue? We don’t know. We don’t know anything about the relationship Jesus and his mother had with the couple getting married; but maybe we do know something about the relationship between Jesus and his mother. We know this, from the conversation they have in this story, the odd conversation they have. “They have no wine,” she says to him. A simple observation, a statement of fact, but surely more than that, too—a not-so-subtle nudge, an indirect imperative, a comment that carries with it the full weight of unspoken and yet manifestly obvious motherly insistence. In pointing out that “They have no wine,” Jesus’ mother says to him, “Do something about it.” And then there’s Jesus response: “What am I supposed to do about it?” or, more literally, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” A maybe not-so-dutiful response. Jesus doesn’t even refer to her as “Mother,” “Woman,” he says, but still his comment carries with it

the implication that she is meddling. And then there's what follows, which also seems to say something about Jesus' relationship with his mother. After telling him about the problem, she tells something to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." She tells them this, with the full assurance that Jesus can do something about it, and that Jesus will do something about it. And he does. In this first mention of the mother of Jesus, at this first of Jesus' signs, she is the one that makes it happen, in the first place.

But what happens then is odd, too. Jesus doesn't just make a little more wine, Jesus makes excessive amounts of wine. The story says that Jesus uses stone jars that would be able to hold twenty or thirty gallons of water. To get a better sense of this, picture those Gatorade containers that they toss on coaches and players after sporting events. Those Gatorade containers usually hold 10 gallons, so picture containers that are two or even three times as big. Then, remember that there are six of them. That's what Jesus decides to use. What does that amount to in wine? Well, again, using more familiar units of measurement, noting that a typical bottle of wine is 750 ml, changing that amount of water into wine yields 1000 bottles. Just how thirsty were these people? Just how much partying was still there for them to do? It's not just the amount, though, it's not just the quantity of the wine, it's the quality of it. Who knows how finely developed the palates of those partiers were, but the steward, at least, was something of a sommelier. The steward tasted the new wine and said, "This is good." Now, I'm guessing that this wine was nicer than the wine that I buy when I'm trying to be fancy. When I want to get a better bottle of wine, my strategy is to look for something that was originally a little more expensive, but now is on sale. Maybe, if I'm feeling really extravagant, I will spend as much as \$20 on a bottle of wine. (Not just prim, you're thinking, but stingy, too...) Let's agree that Jesus has better taste than me. Let's say that his wine, in today's terms, would go for \$40 a bottle. I am sure that Jesus' wine is better than that, much, much better than that, think of all the exquisite, extravagant wines there are out there, a whole world I know nothing about...but even at my stingy estimate, even at just \$40 a bottle, if there are 1000 bottles, that means that Jesus gave that newly married couple a \$40,000 wedding present.

A truly excessive gift, and given almost anonymously, the story says. The steward and the bridegroom don't know where the wine came from—that it came from Jesus—the steward only knows that it is good. We find this out, when we hear that odd conversation that the steward has with the bridegroom. It's a conversation that is oddly revealing of ancient party practices. Or maybe those old party practices are not so odd, and not so ancient: drink the good stuff first, and leave the lousy stuff for later, after drink has dulled the senses. The steward asks the bridegroom, "Why are you serving the good stuff to these sots?"

An odd story, an odd miracle. It doesn't heal anyone who is sick. It doesn't drive out demons. It doesn't feed anyone who is hungry—so say the prim, and the stingy. An odd sign, water into wine. We could be embarrassed about it, sounding, as it does, like a party trick—or we could see the God revealed in it. We could see God's glory; we could let the gospel, with its not-so-subtle hints, with its weight of insistence, here in in the text, and here in our lives; we could let the gospel meddle with us, despite our resistance, despite our stuffiness, despite our stupor. Though our senses be dulled by political mudslinging, by the relentlessness of violence, by the drudgery of daily life, though our senses be dulled, when we are empty, when our wine has run out, God is oddly and gloriously revealed: a God who shows up at parties, a God who does things, a God with good taste, a God who gives generously, anonymously, extravagantly, undeservedly. This is the first sign, says the gospel of John. This celebration, this abundance, this lavish surprise. This is the first sign of God's odd marriage with humanity. This is the first sign of a God who so loves us, as John's gospel will say just one chapter later, in John chapter 3, verse 16, this is the first sign of a God who so loves us that he sends his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him, that whoever sees him, whoever sees his glory revealed, should not perish, but party at the wedding feast that has no end.