

The Life of the Party (John 2:1-11)
Keith D. Herron, Intentional Interim Minister
First Baptist Church, Jefferson City MO
The Second Sunday after Epiphany (Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; I Corinthians 12:1-11)
January 16, 2022

This circumstantial story can be described simply in a headline: They were at a party and the wine ran out. It must have been an unimaginable embarrassment for the two families being joined together in marriage. Jewish weddings were traditionally long, glorious affairs that brought the whole community together and ... the wine ran out before the party pooped.

John tells us Jesus performed his first miracle at a wedding in the small village of Cana, just a short hop from Nazareth, his hometown. Either the bride or the groom must have been a friend of the family, or even kin, since Mary was there. We're not told whether Jesus and the disciples were invited as guests or whether they tagged along on his mother's invitation.

It doesn't matter ... because they were guests at the party and the wine ran out. Most of us know how that feels. Maybe it comes in the occasional feeling of a great sadness that descends upon us like a dark shadow. Maybe it's the sense that we have spent all there is to spend and we have no more reserves within to replenish us. It's the deep sense of a poverty of the soul. Maybe it's the emptiness we feel in the middle of our lives when we know we should be more complete, but all we feel is a feeling of loss we cannot change. Most of us have an idea of what it means for the party of our lives to wind down when the wine of life runs out.

This was the first miracle of Jesus' ministry. He was in Cana, some nine miles from his hometown of Nazareth, and he had already recruited the disciples who would follow him the remainder of his life. It must have been one of their first outings together but nothing much had yet happened.

Where do you begin when you are the Messiah? Where do you start? Everything has a beginning. All great things start somewhere. Perhaps this story helps us understand even Jesus didn't quite know where to begin. No matter, they were at a Jewish wedding feast and the wine ran out.

Jewish weddings were wonderful affairs and marriages were occasions to celebrate and impress. And in those days as they are today, the rich always seemed to have enough to throw their lavish parties with little concern given for costs. But the poor, as they do today, had to worry about expenses. While the poor generally ate less meat and drank less wine in their everyday lives, they would have to save and scrimp for months, maybe years in order to host a wedding in the right way. There were expectations that had to be met. Despite the sacrifice, family and friends would pass harsh judgment on those who could not carry a wedding off in style. Tender lamb and young calves and every delicacy would be served and the wine would

flow freely.

And then there was the length of the celebrations ... as much as seven days of feasting and partying! So, can you imagine the financial obligations of feeding your guests for that long? One scholar humorously suggested Jesus' disciples might have been the reason they ran out of wine! Maybe it was a wonder they didn't run out of more than wine by the time Jesus and his mooching buddies arrived.

But all of the innuendos about the disciples and the suggestion of their poor manners are beside the point in this story. None of it matters because the story is rather simple: They threw a party and the wine ran out! It was a terrible disgrace for the family and something had to be done.

Apparently, no one seemed to see the whole picture but Mary. From the way the story is told, it doesn't appear to have been something many even knew about. I can imagine the wine steward tried to get close to the father who was paying for it all in order to whisper in his ear the bad news of the shortage. He must have done it with some sense of care so as to not make a bad situation worse. And so, few of the guests realized anything was wrong.

But somehow Mary overheard the conversation between the steward and the father about the shortage. Immediately, and quite naturally, she called upon her Messiah son who had not found a way to get started and who seemed very unwilling to step in and fix things. He responded to her with a typical Jewish idiom that sounds awkward in its literal translation, *"What of this to you and what to me?"* It was probably his way of saying to her, "Why should this problem be yours and mine to solve?" I suspect he was aware she was trying to hook him to get him to act when the problem was not his to fix.

That's a good idea for all of us "fixers" in life. We see a problem and don't even think through the issues of whose problem it is in the first place. We jump in and take over the problems of others and try to fix them whether they want us to or not. The only problem is there are lots of folks who have no intention of fixing their own problems because they know there are plenty of "fixers" out in the world who will do their work for them! Often the "fixers" get matched up with the "not-fixers" for marriages and other entangled relationships. It's one thing to be helpful and it's quite another to go around in life trying to intervene in everyone else's problems. What I'm suggesting is Jesus wasn't trying to be rude to his mother. He was simply trying to make sure he didn't move beyond his own boundaries in a rush to fix someone else's problem.

Mary didn't pay him any mind. Did you notice she totally ignored him? In fact, she skipped over the part where they might have even argued about it. She could have asked him, "Jesus, would you come over here and take care of this embarrassing problem for these nice people?" And Jesus, sensing another occasion that his overly pushy mother wanted to get him to do

something no one else wanted him to do, would have answered back, “No, I won’t.”

How do arguments like these go in your family? So, she immediately answered him, “Yes, you will.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Yes, you will.”

“No, I won’t.”

“Jesus, don’t talk back to me, this is your mother speaking to you!” You know the routine...

But Mary ignored his resistance and instead of standing there arguing in circles with him, she simply motioned to the steward in charge of the libations and said directly to him, “*Do whatever he says.*” And in her sweet, pushy way, Mary gave us the first lesson on what it means to be a modern-day disciple: “*Do whatever he tells you to do.*” No more, no less. We are told to go out into the world with the words of Mary to do whatever we’re told to do when Jesus speaks.

Is this the first example in the Bible of WWJD? It’s the acronym of a new generation who are willing to carry those letters around as a reminder of this very story. WWJD ... What would Jesus do? The answer? Do whatever he tells you to do.

This is a wonderfully intriguing story about how the Christian church has interpreted the making of wine out of water over the years. We Baptists have not fully known what to do with it. In this story we have the blatantly honest combination of Jesus and wine at the same party. We have made such a huge issue about the problem of drinking that we’ve been forced to do some mighty fancy hermeneutics in order to explain away the obvious. Some have said Jesus turned the water into unfermented wine. In all honesty, we’ve done some horrendous things to keep the position of Scripture consistent with our own views. Why not let the story simply express itself honestly today?

Mary, overly involved in fixing things, set Jesus up to provide the remedy. His opposition was not that he had a problem with wine, but that he felt pushed into making his first move. And so, he made a faint-hearted attempt with his earthly parent to say, “*Don’t rush me ... my hour has not yet come. It’s not time!*” which almost sounds like, “Maybe I’m not ready.” I’m not sure whether Mary simply overpowered him, as mothers often do, or whether he just needed a little nudge.

But what happened is nothing short of extraordinary. The steward was told to supply somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons of water in six large stone pots. And somewhere

between the well of man's efforts and the divine initiative to see that the vitality of life is renewed, a wine of such rich red sweetness was brought forth that it stunned even the steward who couldn't help but say, *"Everyone serves the good wine first, and then after everyone is a little buzzed, out comes the cheaper wine. But you have kept the good wine until now!"*

Does this story mean something to us this morning? You bet it does! When we find we have done everything in our power to make our lives complete, all we discover is our total inability to keep the wine of our lives from drying up. And when it is gone, the party dries up as well. We find we wither inside because our vitality is as parched as the desert sands. We know that life should be full of richness and that we should be able to savor the experiences of life and be full. But all of us are as dry as the bottom of those stone pots. We must come to Jesus to be filled and we must realize he is the one who can convert what little we have with the rich red blood of his own life.

Don't you see it? This story is the first miracle of Jesus' ministry but it was not his last.

This event, something that few at the wedding even noticed, was the metaphor for his whole life. It's a picture of what his whole life would become. Jesus, the life of the party, wants you to be filled with all the goodness and joy God intended life to be.

For you see, the deep richness of the wine Jesus gives you is the proof God loves you and wants you to be happy. The invitation to the party is God's way of inviting us to the table of a communion with Christ so rich and so compelling we spend the rest of our days learning to live out of that kind of fullness. It's the kind of life John Killinger calls, "the banqueting spirit." So, come, all you who are weary and find rest by joining the party where the wine of God's love never runs out!

Amen.

© 2022 Dr. Keith D. Herron