

January 20, 2019  
Second Sunday After the Epiphany  
John 2:1-11  
Rev. Chip Whitacre

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Lynne and I were married during a church service on a Sunday morning in June. In a park in Iowa City, Iowa. The night before we had a picnic for all the out of town guests. It was one of the hottest weekends in Iowa history. The next morning it was unbelievably hot by 9AM and the temperature was expected to top 100 degrees again. And the humidity was about the same. After the service we had a reception for the church folks there in the park. Then we moved to Lynne's house where we had invited those folks who weren't able to be at the ceremony. We had ordered what we thought was enough food for everyone. But when the guests arrived it seemed like the food was devoured in minutes. It was like a swarm of locusts had descended and there was nothing we could do. But all-in-all it was just a great day and a great weekend. In the end we were married, surrounded by our family and friends. And we got to celebrate with family and friends and co-workers. Many of whom had traveled far to be there. Which brings me to today's Gospel lesson. Weddings are weddings after all. It doesn't matter where or when they occur. Expectations are high and nerves are as taut as the cables on a suspension bridge. Every detail has been planned so that everything comes off without a hitch. But everyone knows that "without a hitch" is not reality when it comes to weddings. And everyone has a story about a wedding where something or someone went off the tracks.

It seems that the situation in first century Palestine was not that different than today. But there were a few important differences. In those days, a wedding was considered the marriage of the two families not just the two individuals. The wedding celebration could go on for days. Up to seven days in some cases. It was not uncommon for the entire village to be invited to the wedding. Thus, it was a very costly event that required a great deal of planning and preparation. The groom and his family were responsible for the celebration. It was not uncommon for them to enlist the assistance of others to help provide food and wine. And the honor of everyone associated with the celebration was closely linked to its success. You might say that expectations were high. And lots of people stood to lose face if there was a "hitch", like say running out of wine. So, we can see how there might have been a pretty strong sense of urgency when Jesus' mother notices that the wine has run out.

The evangelist weaves a lot of details into the story of the wedding at Cana. A story that is only found in John. Which leaves us without comparison in the other Gospels. Details which can make understanding the message tricky. Some of the details are critical to the message of this particular story. Others are important to understanding Jesus' ministry, but not so critical to the story. And there is even one detail that seems to make no sense whatsoever. On reading this lesson, most people notice the water changing to wine, the large amount of wine and the dispute between Jesus and his mother. Usually in that order. We might summarize the story as follows: Jesus goes to a wedding with his disciples. His mother is there. She observes that they have run out of wine. Her observation implies that Jesus should do something about it. He resists and makes a snarky comment. He relents and solves the wine shortage big time. The bridegroom receives accolades for saving the best for last. The disciples believe in Jesus. They all leave to hang out in Capernaum.

Certainly, the water changing to wine is central to the story. That it is an extravagant amount of very good quality wine is also important. That the best has been saved for last is also important to the story. But the timing of event, on the third day, is central to the story. Up to this point in the Gospel the timing of events has all been "on the next day". With this reading the timing of the event becomes much

more specific. It doesn't take much imagination to see a connection to the resurrection. So, now we might paraphrase the story like this. Jesus is making a new creation in which all people will have abundant life. And the best part happens at the end of the story.

But there are also details in the story that provide important insights into Jesus and his ministry. We don't know how or when the water changes to wine. All we know is that Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with water. Then he has them take some to the steward of the feast. There isn't any incantation or gesture or other action that might signal a change. And that I believe is a key point about Jesus. It happens because he says it. Like the creation story in Genesis when God speaks the cosmos into being, Jesus speaks and new creation happens. In this case, the water of purification becomes the wine of celebration, a symbol of restoration and abundance in the Hebrew scriptures. Which leads us to another aspect of Jesus that is important. He works through others. It is the servants who Jesus works with to change the water to wine. They are the instruments of Jesus' creative action. In the end Jesus passes that responsibility on to his disciples. And they on to us.

But what about the nonsensical detail that I mentioned earlier. For that we have to go back to the wedding. Jesus' mother simply states that they are out of wine. A circumstance that will cause great embarrassment to the groom and his family. Jesus knows she is telling him to do something about it. His response seems jarring. It sets a different tone that makes it stand apart from the rest of the story. We as the reader find this all a bit confusing as have others over the centuries. Scholars tell us that the term "woman" is actually more respectful than it sounds to our modern ears. But even if we can accept that, the remainder of the comment raises other questions about Jesus. What concern indeed?! Your neighbor is about to suffer significant embarrassment. And you can't bring yourself to help, when you know you can? Aren't you the one who has been reminding us of the greatest commandment? It just doesn't measure up to what we expect from Jesus. To what I expect from Jesus. My Jesus is always kind and thoughtful. He is always slow to anger and measured in his responses. He is never snarky to his mom. I suspect that I am not the only one whose expectations of Jesus have been challenged by his comments in this story.

In fact, in academic circles Jesus' hesitation has been much debated. It is known as the "divine reluctance". It occurs several times in John's Gospel and follows a pattern. A request is made, Jesus resists, he ultimately complies with the request, and there is a conflict with the Judeans. It is not unlike the "messianic secret" in the Gospel of Mark. An inexplicable reluctance on Jesus' part to be known for who he truly is. Even while his actions reveal it.

I wonder if this isn't a sign of Jesus' humanity. After all who among us hasn't wrestled with a not-so-divine-reluctance to act when we know we can? Perhaps sitting at a traffic light, eyes straight ahead while a person with a sign asking for help stands just outside our car. Or who among us hasn't shied away from using our gifts fully at times? Particularly at times when to do so would require us to step out of our comfort zone. Maybe take a leadership in a situation where we know our gifts and experience could make a difference. Of course, in the end Jesus does act. He obeys his mother. He accepts his responsibility and uses his creative power to act on behalf of his neighbor. He meets expectations – his mother's, and ours. So, a wedding story is a good carrier for a life lesson. Despite all our planning and expectations things will go awry. When they do Jesus will be there for us. And that's comforting. But I can't help but wonder if maybe there's another question for us in this story. Are we living up to what Jesus expects from us?