

“FOOD FOR THOUGHT: WEDDING FEAST”

John 2:1-12

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I went to a wedding recently, and I just need to make clear that none of my comments this morning should be taken as a reflection or feeling about that wedding. I had a thoroughly enjoyable time which had nothing to do with being the “plus one” and not the officiant, which is to say that many pastors prefer funerals over weddings.

A funeral does not involve months of planning, sometimes endless coaxing of the couple not to sweat the details, and resentment from the families over the fees for use of the building, the custodian, and the pastor’s time. Typically, funerals have less drama. The grieving family welcomes and appreciates the pastor’s time, counsel, and assistance in celebrating the life of their loved one. It’s not that expectations are lower, just that they’re more reasonable and easily met. But with weddings, pastors often run into the desire for a perfect wedding and the ideas of what make a wedding perfect are ambiguous and not always shared by the different members of the families involved.

So... when Mary comes to Jesus with word that the wine is running out, I totally understand Jesus’ less than enthusiastic response: “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” He could have been more pastoral. He could have said something more like: “Mom, think about whose problem this is.” They’re both just guests. Jesus isn’t the officiant. He seems prepared to duck responsibility. There’s nothing to indicate that Jesus is related to the “happy, soon to be unhappy” couple. He tells his mother that even if this problem fell within his mission, it’s not time yet.

And Mary ignores him. Essentially tells him to get on with it. This whole exchange has puzzled biblical scholars for a very long time. It seems that Jesus’ ministry begins at Mary’s urging and not on his own time schedule. They’re not on the same page, but Jesus clearly defers to Mary. Is the gospel writer emphasizing Mary’s special significance to the church? Is Jesus demonstrating the importance of the commandment to honor one’s parents? Or are we to see how authentic is the gospel’s call to partnering with God?

However you choose to unravel the puzzle of their relationship, a few things are clear. Mary feels responsibility for this couple whose wedding day is about to unravel. Mary knows that there is a way to avoid this disaster. She knows that her son can do something about it.

Pastors avoid these kinds of dilemmas. Unless the reception is in the church, we wash our hands of receptions. We take control of the service. We warn the couple about very young flower girls and ring-bearers who may not cooperate with their plans. We address seating arrangements when step-parents are involved. We attempt to take control of intrusive photographers and we insist on the sobriety of the wedding party when the

service begins. Except if the family wants us to offer a blessing at the reception, our responsibility ends with the benediction.

But here's the thing. The gospels don't tell stories about weddings. They tell stories about the reception, about the feast. The wedding is about the vows, the commitments that the couple make for their future. They are only words though. They are not the living out of those words. They are not word made flesh. The living begins with the reception, with the hospitality extended to family and friends.

It's not that I am unconcerned about the couple's future. I always tell a couple that they can come back to me if they hit a rough patch. I emphasize the importance of the marriage over the wedding. Counseling focuses not just on the past that they bring to the marriage, but on their future life together. Again, these are just words. One hopes that they carry forward into the life that follows.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus has many extended conversations, but unlike the other gospels, they are not straightforward "teachings." They engage individuals in the context of their lives. They invite them to a different, more meaningful future. One might even say that they are words becoming flesh. He has a conversation with Nicodemus, a teacher in Israel, about being born into a new life; with a woman of Samaria about living water, with Mary and Martha about resurrection. Nicodemus bears the cost of preparing Jesus' body for burial. The Samaritan becomes the first evangelist. Mary and Martha become witnesses to the raising of Lazarus, one of the many "signs" performed by Jesus to indicate the life that God desires for us. He also feeds a hungry crowd, heals a man born blind.

But the first sign, he performs at a wedding feast. Before multiplying the loaves and raising the dead, he turns water into wine. Setting aside his apparent reluctance, it seems a rather understated way to begin his mission. Not that such a thing is easy, but it's rather under the radar. Only the servants know that the wine started out as water. The steward finds it odd that the good wine was saved to the end. The only impact that we're told about is that the disciples believed, but then they already believed.

So let's think about this. What's at stake here is hospitality. To run out of wine before the celebration was over would have been a serious oversight of cultural expectations. It's the feast that marks a wedding as a joyous occasion. The ceremony, however joyful, marks it as a serious matter, not to be undertaken lightly. It's the feast that says to family and friends that the couple wants to share their joy and to live out their marriage in this community. We don't know why the wine ran out, but it's a bad omen whatever the reason.

Hospitality also comes into question in Jesus' ministry. John writes in the first chapter: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:11-12). The word becomes flesh, but will he be welcomed? Will the wine run out?

Not if Mary has anything to say about it, and apparently she does. I frankly don't understand this odd exchange between Jesus and his mother. Maybe Jesus was planning something more transformative. Happy couples are not generally the object of Jesus' ministry. He transformed lives dramatically when he cast out demons, gave sight to the blind, made the lame to walk, persuaded the Samaritan that she was indeed welcome in God's kingdom.

When you consider those who benefitted from Jesus, you might think that Jesus' ministry was mostly about leveling the playing field. He does have a preference for the poor, for those on the underside of life. But when he gives sight to the blind, he does something more than just give them something that everyone else already has. There's this sense of joy and abundance. "I came that you might have life, life abundant," he says in chapter 10. And here, he doesn't just make up for the shortfall with an average wine. It's a good wine.

When John sets this story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he sets the stage for everything that follows. He's telling us that Jesus didn't come just to make up what some of us are lacking. He came to live among us, to demonstrate the goodness and abundance of life. And the fact that this first sign is about hospitality is a great reminder that abundance and goodness is rooted in hospitality, in living into the word and promise of welcome.

Maybe the fact that Mary gets the ball rolling on this miracle should be a reminder to each of us that whether or not the wine runs out depends somewhat on us. Ultimately God provides, but our welcome does matter in our own lives and in the life of the world. It's part of the abundance that is God's world. It's part of what we do as followers of Christ. Amen.