

January 20 2019

John 2:1-11

Jesus has been baptized by John and begun gathering disciples. Each of the gospels begins Jesus' ministry in a different way. In John, one of the interesting things we notice is at the beginning of his ministry and at the end, Mary, mother of Jesus, is present. In both cases, she is witnessing what looks like a bad outcome – what looks like shame and humiliation. And in each case, abundance unlooked for comes through Jesus. Hear now the story of the wedding at Cana:

The Wedding at Cana

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

There is much that is intriguing and a little bit odd about this story.

How come Jesus needed his mom to tell him to there's no time like the present to get started?

How come only the servants and Mary and his best buds knew what happened? None of the important people knew. How is it that such amazing grace is poured out and it goes unrecognized by so many?

And how can Jesus turn our shame and humiliation around?

Shame and humiliation were right about to happen. The wine ran out too early. It's the third day of the wedding banquet and there's still the rest of the week to go. This party is only at the half-way mark. So running out of wine this early – it's not good. How do you say to people oops. Just kidding. Don't have enough for you. Can you imagine a wedding where the caterers ran out of food and half the people don't get to eat?

Mary says to her son: "They have no wine." Apparently from the tone of her voice, it is clear that she is not gossiping or putting them down. This is more like a "the dishes aren't done yet" comment. She's giving him a super obvious, not so subtle hint that something needs to be done and it needs to be done now. Jesus certainly understand that she expects **him** to do something about the wine.

Jesus replies like most children do when their parents tell them to stop goofing off with their friends and do something useful – why me? This is not my problem to solve. And it wasn't.

Jesus isn't in the business of waving a magic wand at all our little problems and making them go away.

Mary knows better than to argue with her son. Rather, she turns to the servants and says, "Do whatever he tells you." And we know the rest of the story.

Maybe what Mary knew, was that this was about more than solving someone else's problem.

Maybe it was more about how when Jesus is on the scene, grace upon grace is possible. And when he's not, the world seems to give in to the grip of judgment, gossip and meanness.

Maybe it was about how when kindness is done, shame and humiliation are forced out the door.

Maybe it's about how just when it seems the worst is happening, God is still at work in unexpected ways.

Shame and humiliation. That would have been the order of the day had the party ended three days early. How do you recover from something like that? How does that change the dynamics in a small community? Always and forever the story will be told and it's how you'll be known.

When I was 20 and my sister was 18 we drove from Columbus, OH to St. Paul MN. It was snowy and blowing out. She had been driving for two years and I had been driving for four. So I considered myself way more experienced than her. She, however, insisted on driving part of the way. And she hit a patch of black ice and put us in a ditch and a tow truck almost couldn't get us out of the snow. I have held that story over her head for 40 years. And I have never once suggested that it is possible if I had hit that patch of black ice that I might have put the car in the ditch too. We remember and we retell stories of shame and humiliation. It's how people are known.

A few years after this wedding party Jesus is dying on a cross. Shame and humiliation for him and all his followers. On the third day – something changed. You may have noticed that it was on the third day that everything changed at the wedding at Cana too.

Maybe one of the messages for us is that the third day is not the end of the story. We're only half-way through. So even though it feels like the end, like nothing will ever be right again, God is not done with us yet.

Think for a minute about one of your more humiliating moments. This is a small thing, but some of you may remember that on the Sunday I preached here for the first time, and you all were to vote on whether or not to hire me, I was talking with my hands as usual, and just flung the parament off the pulpit. It was within the first minute or so of the sermon. It didn't feel like a moment that created confidence that here was a professional that you would really want to have in the pulpit week after week.

Dave Woodward very kindly came into the church on Monday morning with Velcro and made sure that the paraments would be attached securely to the pulpit, so I would never have to worry again about that kind of awkward moment.

Kindness. And it became a blip on the radar, rather than an ongoing story of humiliation. Neither you or I worry every week about where the parament is going to land this Sunday.

It's a small thing, but kindness can wipe away humiliation and shame.

Maybe one of the reasons the miracle at Cana was private was because it wouldn't have saved the family from humiliation if everyone had known. Maybe it's because when your goal in life is to show how superior you are you humiliate others and you need it to be public, but when your goal in life is to lift others up, being public undermines the cause.

When you think about it, one of the temptations Jesus undergoes in the wilderness is to put on a flamboyant show that would announce to everyone how special he is. "Throw yourself off a cliff so everyone can see angels save you. Then people will know you are God."

In the gospel of John, there is no wilderness temptation story.

But there is this story - that says as Jesus begins his ministry: this is not about flashy, look-at-me, showmanship. It is about what happens when instead of needing to look good ourselves, we see to the well-being of our neighbor.

God doesn't need to look good. God already is good. And in so many ways Jesus was not about being impressive – if he had been, he would not have been a carpenter in Galilee. He'd have been born in the palace.

He was so much more about helping us see how much the world is changed by kindnesses. And that we don't have to pretend we are better than everyone else. And that those things we feel worst about, God has a plan for that. And it's not about making us feel worse than we already feel.

How does God reach into those places we feel worst about and shift the dynamic? Because this is about God showing up in the least expected places. With kindness, but with more than kindness. With wine. In spades.

This is not a sober story. It is not about how little wine there is, and there isn't enough for everyone and we're going to need to start rationing it out, determining who is worthy of a few drops. It is not about buying into the world's existing shame structure.

This is about extravagance, about the possibility that God is so full of joy giving wine that there is more than we could ever drink. When you think about it, if God makes that much wine, we must have a lot of need.

Jesus, after all, did not make a case of wine but hundreds of gallons. One of my colleagues says: This entire story smacks of being “over the top” in so very many senses. It’s as though someone asked for a bottle of water and Jesus gave him Lake Michigan. It’s as though someone asked to buy her child a toy and Jesus gave her the entire Amazon.com toy warehouse.

Glory does not come from doing miracles. Glory comes from goodness of humans to each other. Yet we fail to recognize that. Amazing grace is poured out and it goes unrecognized by so many.

A life of unbounded kindness is what we are invited to. A life where we see kindness, receive kindness, give kindness.

Maybe this story really is about how when Jesus is on the scene, grace upon grace is possible. And when he’s not, we give in to the grip of judgment, gossip and meanness.

Maybe it is all about how when kindness is done, shame and humiliation are forced out the door.

Maybe it’s about how just when it seems the worst is happening, God is still at work in unexpected ways.

No one is has to leave this party thirsty.