

John 2:1-11
Epiphany 2C + January 20, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Manifested Glory

The Word of the Lord from John 2:11: "This, the first of His signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested His glory. And His disciples believed in Him." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I love the season of Epiphany, because it's where we hear readings about how Jesus first makes Himself known in His public ministry. You've got to admit that His public ministry starts with a bang as He's baptized and the Father speaks from heaven. Now that His ordination has taken place, He goes to set the stage for all that is to come: that's why it's always interesting, in each of the Gospels, to watch what He does first, to listen to His first public words. In John, Jesus' first act as the Messiah is to go to a wedding.

It sounds like a big wedding too – Jesus *and* His disciples are all invited, and a wedding celebration lasts several days. Several days means lots of food and lots of drink; and in a survey I just made up on the fly, 76% of wedding guests rate "refreshments" as more important to "reception satisfaction" than "the presence of the bride and groom."

This party, however, is about to fall apart because they are out of wine. When Jesus' mother brings this to His attention, He responds, "Woman, what does this have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come."

Those words are often misunderstood: when He calls His mother "Woman," it's respectful, not a version of "Listen here, lady." "What does this have to do with Me?" isn't an angry retort, but a question to prod Mary's faith – and yours! What *does* this have to do with Jesus? His hour has not yet come: His hour is the cross, when He is lifted up and glorified by dying for the sins of the world. After all, the Son of God has not become flesh for the purpose of covering for incompetent catering, has He?

What does this wine shortage have to do with Jesus? Mary may not know, but she trusts enough to tell the servants, "Do whatever He tells you."

Six stone jars stand nearby, and this is where it gets to be delightful. They each hold twenty or thirty gallons, and they're there for the Jewish rites of purification: these are ceremonial laws which say that people must wash their hands before the meal to be ritually clean. Note, please, that this is not commanded by God. That doesn't mean it's a bad thing for everybody to do this before a meal, though: parents tell kids to do it all the time; and if hand-washing reminds the people that it's God who makes them clean, so much the better. On the other hand, if they were to believe that they made themselves righteous in God's eyes by washing their hands before eating, that would be a problem.

This is our measure of rules, traditions and customs established by man: if they point to Christ, they're beneficial. If they point away from Christ, they're harmful. If they do neither, then use them in freedom, and in service to our neighbor. Bear in mind, by the way, that traditions and the like can go back and forth between beneficial, harmful and neutral as time goes by.

At any rate, Jesus doesn't criticize the presence of these jars or man's rules about washing hands, but He uses the jars for something better. He tells the servants to fill them up to the brim with water, so we're talking somewhere between 150 and 180 gallons – which again suggests a big wedding with a lot of hands to be washed. He tells the servants to take some of the water to the master of the

feast. When the master of the feast tastes it, it's not water. It's wine. It's good wine – really good, even better than the “special occasion” wine that Teresa and I buy for \$8 a bottle. In fact, it's so remarkably good that the master of the feast calls the bridegroom and says, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

Jesus saves the wedding celebration by turning water into wine. It seems a frivolous sort of miracle, and for some it's controversial: I've heard it argued that, since Jesus wouldn't contribute to drunkenness, this must have been non-alcoholic wine. The text simply doesn't support that: wine is wine. We will also point out that if people have “drunk freely,” it does not mean that they are completely soused, although they might want to wait a bit before they get behind the wheel of their ox or donkey.

Here's what we can say, supported by this text and Scripture: Jesus gives gifts, and sinners are prone to abuse His gifts. Sex and sexuality are gifts from God, and do sinners misuse them? Unborn babies are gifts of God, and how are they too often treated in this world? Forgiveness is a gift of God, purchased by the blood of Christ, and do you ever cheapen its value? Here at the wedding, Jesus gives wine: if it is abused by sinners, that is the fault of sinners. If Jesus only gave gifts that sinners didn't abuse, there would be nothing left to give.

Given what Scripture says, drinking wine is like washing your hands. If it doesn't lead you away from Christ and doesn't harm your neighbor, you're free to have a glass of wine. You're also equally free not to.

Such discussions, however, miss the point of the story. The text doesn't say, “This, the first of His signs, Jesus did to justify your glass of wine at dinner.” It says that by this miracle Jesus “manifested His glory.”

What does it mean that Jesus manifested His glory? It means that this miracle points to His work for your redemption.

To those wondering why He would make a miracle with wine, we note that, now and then in the Old Testament, the Lord describes your salvation in terms of a feast with good wine. Abundant, flowing wine is a sign of God's good pleasure. For instance, Isaiah 24:11 describes the impending *judgment* of God by saying, “There is an outcry in the streets *for lack of wine*; all joy has grown dark; the gladness of the earth is banished.” But in the next chapter, the work of the coming Messiah is described this way:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And ... He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. (Is. 25:6,8)

Think of Cana as a miniature demonstration of Isaiah 24 and 25: The prophet might say, “There is an outcry at Cana for lack of wine! The joy grows dark and the gladness of the wedding is about to be banished!” But then the Messiah arrives: He saves the wedding because He provides a feast of well-aged wine – of aged wine well-refined. And He does so because He is on His way to the cross in order to swallow up death forever. He will swallow up death forever by gutting it from the inside out. He'll die for the sins of the world, then rise again to conquer death and its power.

But on that day in Cana, there are no predictions of suffering and death: there is only a wedding celebration saved from disaster and turned into something better. It is turned better as Jesus saves the day and subtly hints that salvation comes not from human traditions, but by His miraculous work.

After all, it's good to wash your hands before you eat; but for the banquet feast of heaven, you must be washed in the blood of the Lamb.

Why a first miracle at a wedding? It is no coincidence, I think, that it's John who records the wedding of Cana in his gospel. Throughout the Bible, there's a running theme that the Lord is the Bridegroom and His people are the bride. That's made most clear in Ephesians 5, where we see that every marriage is to be an illustration of Christ and His Church as husband and wife love and serve one another. All of this culminates in the book of Revelation, also written by St. John. The final chapters are stunning: the bride is prepared, clothed in fine white linen and made pure by the blood of Christ. The Bridegroom defeats all of His – and her – enemies decisively and forever; and then, after a betrothal that has lasted since the garden of Eden, the wedding takes place. After all the evil and strife and trouble and bloodshed and martyrdom of this sinful world, the Last Day – the Resurrection – is described as "the marriage feast of the Lamb." That day is an eternal day: this wedding feast never ends.

Our text is from John, chapter 2, and John will tease you with water and wine throughout his Gospel. Soon Jesus will be telling Nicodemus that he must be born again by water and the Spirit, then offering living water to the woman at the well so that she never thirsts again; all too soon, He'll be refusing sour wine as He hangs on the cross and suffers so that He might give you the well-aged wine of salvation. It's there, on the cross at the other end of the Gospel, that His hour does come, when He is crucified for the sins of the world – where His side is pierced and blood and water flow. It's there that the Bridegroom dies to save His bride. It's there that His glory is most manifested in this world, because it's manifested in love and sacrifice.

John will go on to say in his first epistle that the Holy Spirit delivers Jesus to you by water and blood; and so we rejoice that the Scriptures declare that Jesus comes to us in the waters of Holy Baptism, even as He delivers His body and blood to us in bread and wine in His Holy Supper.

It is, after all, no coincidence that the Lord's Supper is often called "a foretaste of the feast to come." Here, in His Word and His Supper, the Bridegroom comes to visit His betrothed, to forgive her sins and keep her stain- and blemish-free until the marriage feast begins. Here He says to you, "I've died to wash you clean so that you might be Mine forever."

In a way, then, this service is a little like the wedding at Cana. Think about the text one more time: if you're a casual wedding guest in Cana that day, what have you seen? At most, you might have noticed servants busily filling the water jars to the brim, then carrying some to the master of the feast, then his smile of delight. But what did you see Jesus do? At most, you saw Him speaking to the servants – and I'm betting He's not the only one talking to the waiters as the wine runs dry. My point is that as Jesus manifests His glory, He appears to do nothing. He speaks to declare His plan, and the servants do the work.

So it is in congregations today: the Lord provides His Word, and sets His servants to work. It's the Lord who has died for your sins, and it is the Lord who still delivers forgiveness, life and salvation to you in His means of grace. But you don't get to see the glorious Lord today – you're stuck with some goofy-looking guy with the fashion sense to wear a plastic dog collar. Nevertheless, it is the Lord who is doing the work, just as at Cana; and just as at Calvary, and outside an empty tomb on the third day. The Bridegroom is still at work for you, preparing and preserving you for the marriage feast, when His glory is manifested in you. By His grace you are cleansed and part of His bride, waiting for her wedding day; because by His grace, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen