

Let's Have Another

John 2:1-11

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If a preacher is lucky, and she usually is, Scripture can be counted on to be at least a bit baffling—the kind of thing that you need a Divinity degree, a few jokes, and a knack for storytelling to unpack. But there are rare occasions when a story is so plainly told, so simple and concise, that the preacher should stand back and let the story tell itself. The Wedding at Cana is one of those stories.

But bully for you, because I find myself at this moment unable to sit back. I've been reading a lot about Christianity lately, and I've been hearing a lot of hemming and hawing about our future. People are worried. And I'm worried too, but not because I'm afraid Christianity is dwindling or becoming somehow less vital than in the glorious 50s. I'm worried because when I look at the church, the Reformed church, the Presbyterian church, I see congregations full of mourners. And it seems to me that we could each do with a glass, perhaps two, of Jesus' miracle elixir.

There is no doubt that our present moment does, at first glance, lend itself to apocalyptic thinking. In May 2015, we mainline Protestants got national coverage when the Pew Research Center issued *America's Changing Religious Landscape*,¹ the results of a major long-term study mapping the religious affiliations of Americans. For years we pastors have been bemoaning the declining church, calling on pallbearers to carry its casket, ordering flowers to place on its all-but-certain grave. Now we've got the numbers to confirm the diagnosis: Christianity is declining across the United States, and our brand, mainline Christianity, has found itself bearing the brunt of those changes. In 2007 mainline Protestants represented 18.1% of responders. Now, less than a decade later (only 7 years!), our numbers have shrunk. We represent only 14.7% of US adults. And it's not because megachurches are booming or Catholicism is growing. Christianity in twentieth-century America is on the decline. Meanwhile those who identify as "unaffiliated," known as "*nones*" in the popular parlance, have grown drastically from 16.1% in 2007 to 22.8% in 2014.

Crank up the organs, y'all, we've got dirges to play. The church is dying. Christianity is over! Sing your hymns now before they're all forgotten!

The church, and I fear we Christians, has become so caught up in our self-obsessed narratives of past splendor, so consumed by early American Christendom, so focused on borrowed nostalgia for misremembered glory days—you'll have heard the wistful remembrance "when everybody came to everything," when everyone was like us, and everyone believed how we did and thought like we did and looked like we did—that we have allowed a generation to come through our doors unnoticed, lost in the fray of our anxiety, our arguments, and our gloom. We have allowed ourselves to be defined by our quarreling—with each other and with the greater culture. It's no wonder, then, that so many young Americans see the church as an outdated, irrelevant, and occasionally harmful institution.

Well that's the bad news...and a heck of a way to begin a sermon. But there's

good news too, and it's wine. Cana's miracle is a simple story. But don't let that fool you, because from every corner, within every word, there's life breaking out of this overlooked scene at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Life calling the church away from her funereal anxiety and into the joyous feast of the Kingdom of God. So before I get (more) worked up, let's turn our attention to a Galilean province that may well have been Greenville.

This is the first thing—*the first thing*—that Jesus does in his public ministry in the Gospel of John. He's called some disciples, but this is his debutante party. What happens at Cana will set the mood for everything to come. You might expect something big, a major healing or a minor resurrection, but this begins rather quietly.

Only John reports the trip from Nazareth to Cana. The newly formed rag-tag group of disciples have traveled three days—the number is significant, *three days*. John is setting a tone here—for a wedding reception.² They've barely been there for a minute when the wine runs dry. Imagine it. Or maybe you can't because you, like me, would have bolted at the first mention of a dwindling bar. Here you are surrounded by your closest friends, and just when things are getting good, the wine runs out. Call up Shonda Rhimes y'all, this is *scandalous*!

Who knows how many people will have noticed the lack before word gets to Jesus. It doesn't much matter; his mother knows, and she seems to have a plan. Echoing the narrator, she names the reality plainly: "They have no wine." Jesus seems unconcerned, distancing himself from such triviality. "Woman," he says (there's no reason to think he's being cross; he tenderly calls her the same at Golgotha).³ "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

It's a strange response, but then hers was a strange statement. Jesus is not the host of the feast, and he certainly isn't going out at this hour to make a wine run. The wine shortage affects neither his nor his mother's social standing. Most importantly, it's just not time for The Big One. "My hour has not yet come," Jesus replies. Everything, *everything* Jesus does is pointed toward that hour when the Son of Man finds his throne on a cross. *This* is decidedly not *that*.

Well either Mary doesn't listen or she knows something Jesus doesn't, because she gets the servants involved. And I want you to notice something here, because it's the beginning of a pattern. In inviting the servants on the scene, Mary opens up the story. Though we found ourselves at a wedding, we were privy to only two characters—Mary and her son. Slowly, though, the frame widens, and we begin to see more and more of this strange gathering.⁴

Consider it: in the center of the frame stands Jesus, confronted immediately by Mary. Their discussion is brief, but it prods Mary to action. The camera follows her, where it lingers on her command to the servants who hurriedly go to find Jesus. In their hustle to find Jesus, the camera lingers on six stone water jars used for ritual purification. They're huge, each holding upwards of thirty gallons. When full they would provide an absurd abundance of water.

The scene has expanded, and we begin to get an idea of the scope. Still, outside of his mother and the servants, no one is paying much attention to Jesus. Strange that no one seems to notice when, at his request, the servants begin carrying gallons upon gallons of water to the stone jars, filling them right up to the brim...sloshing water as they go, filling the jars until it laps over the brim.

"Now draw some out," says Jesus who, despite his initial reluctance, has given

time for this quandary, “and take it to the chief steward.” (The scene opens up once more!) For all the Servants knew, they were delivering a ladle of water to the poor fellow. I imagine they must have thought Jesus was insulting the man, pointing out his failure to provide, prodding him with a not-so-subtle reminder that this wedding would reach a premature end because of his poor planning.⁵ The servants reach the steward and the steward drinks deeply. Only this is not water—it is wine.

The scene is almost comic. The Steward, certainly flummoxed by the last minute appearance of this new vintage assumes some tomfoolery by the bridegroom. Why in the world, he wonders, would anyone serve the good stuff to folks who’ve already been drinking for hours? He calls for the bridegroom—and again the scene opens up, the shot pans over the crowd. Even these many years later, the steward’s protest makes certain sense: “Everyone serves the good wine first and then, after the dancing has started, Lo! the Natty Light and boxes of Franzia, but you, *you* have saved the vintage Chateau Lafite until now!”

And that’s it. The narrative action ends with the steward and the bridegroom each thinking the other has gotten up to something. The guests, equally as ignorant, are nevertheless overjoyed at the prize vintage now freely pouring. The party once threatened by a dry well is now guaranteed to continue for days. And we, who overheard Jesus reluctant to divulge glory till “The Hour,” now hear from the narrator that “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and the disciples believed in him.”

Six stone water jars. Each holding 20 or 30 gallons. 180 gallons. That’s 604 bottles of the very best wine. His glory revealed. Almost no one knew.

In his gospel the author of *John* never calls Jesus’ transformational acts miracles. It’s always “Signs.” A sign points beyond itself; its significance is not the object, but the thing which the object signifies. What, I wonder, is signified by 180 gallons of the very best wine?

We’re used to the big signs—signs based on need. Eyesight restored, the strength to stand up and walk, 500 fed, a demoniac relieved. But there’s none of that here—not yet. The sign at Cana addresses an all too human party foul. One would not imagine such an error would attract the eye of the Messiah. Nevertheless Jesus Christ, God become man, appears on the scene and makes provision. The one who is very-God and very-Man transforms the mundane, ordinary celebrations of mundane, ordinary human beings and provides an absurd bounty, sanctifying their celebrations by his presence.

The sign at Cana is often overlooked. It seems trivial in light of what will come, unserious in the face of far more important things. Yes, yes, I reply, Jesus has come for The Hour, for the Great Act. And everything he does points to the cross—to those three days. Our lives hinge on the glory of a King raised high. But he has also come for *this*, for joy and celebration and merrymaking. This is the fullness of incarnation. Not *only* the cross but *also* the wine.

And not just any wine, but the very best. And not just the very best, but an absurd excess of it, more than the disciples and the wedding guests and the town could have ever consumed! The camera pans out one last time. Why, why would there be so much wine if it weren’t for us? Why would the jars be brimming, overfull, and spilling if we are not those to whom the narrator next turns? The guests didn’t know where this new wine, this great joy, was coming from, but we do. And that’s why I’m

not signing up for Christianity's dour funeral.

Here's what the church and its prognosticators have failed to see. There's a difference between growing up and dying, between change and decay. The church looks different than it used to, a little battered perhaps and frayed at the edges, but it's not dying. It's transforming, like that little wedding where the wine had gone dry until lo! it started flowing again.

When Jesus Christ is the host, you can bet that the pots will pour out with rejoicing forever and ever amen. What should our response be to the transformation? Show up and drink of that joy, be served from the finest vine.

Before you get ahead of yourself though, remember this. If Jesus is our host, as he is at this table, and if he has enough wine for a crowd, which he does, then we can't much control who we might find seated next to us. We'd planned a lovely funeral, organized the best preachers, commissioned the best requiems. But a wedding? The guest list for the wedding is wide open. Which, I fear, is precisely why some of us might prefer to dwell on Christianity's death rather than rejoice in its new life. Because newness is always a risk. Following the abundant wine, which has spilled over into streets and camps and shelters and even a few sanctuaries, are folks who think and look and act differently than we do, folks who demand that church move from sanctuaries to streets.

Making room at the feast is a joyful task, but it is not always easy. To make room at this table, in our pews, and in our communities is to finally relinquish the false security of control. To make room is to recognize that it is the Spirit who calls, the Spirit who transforms, the Spirit who provides. There is a joyous wedding banquet. The invitations have gone far and wide. To me and to you, respectable guests no doubt, but also, and perhaps most importantly, to places we would otherwise avoid, people with whom we'd rather not be seen.

Christians have gotten so bogged down with infighting and policing Christianity that we've forgotten that the living Lord has called us to new joy in a community wider and deeper than we ever could have imagined. A community of merrymaking that looks a lot more like a party than a wake. A community of welcome that builds bridges, not walls.

Where, O church, is your joy? Where your barrels of finest wine? We are a people called to the cross, yes, but what use is our freedom, what use is our great hope, if we do not also have the joy of Cana's wine? And how do we expect to pass on to the generations our hope if we are always caught up in nostalgia and mourning for something that never truly existed?

It is my sincere hope for each of us, beloved church, that the wine we drink from today be as real to us as it was for the steward, as real as it was for the bridegroom and the disciples. It is my sincere hope, beloved friends, that we too might taste the intoxicating joy that has come with Christ's incarnation. Among the disciples this new wine, this small glory, inspired belief. They saw only the edge of what would come, but by its beauty, its simplicity, its uncomplicated welcome, they were called further up and further in, following the thrilling scent of new wine mingled with holy blood, the paradoxical scent of life. So it is for us today at this table and every day in this world.

Jesus shows up, and the intoxicating flavor of glory breaks out. The world changes. He is transforming our sadness into joy, our anger into mercy, our fear into the King-

dom of God. And everywhere and always he is transforming water into wine. Always inviting, always calling.⁶

So let's have another, shall we?

Notes

1 "America's Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow," Pew Research Center, Washington D.C. (May 12, 2015). <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report>, accessed February 14, 2017.

2 Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 97.

3 Ibid., 99.

4 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov: A Novel in Four Parts with Epilogue* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 359-363.

5 Gail O'Day and Susan Hylen, *John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 36.

6 Dostoevsky, 361-362.