

SLD01.17.10 2nd Ordinary
EPC
John 2:1-11
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Water to Wine”

Well, for us it's been just three short weeks since Jesus was born. But the gospels, wanting to get down to business, are inclined to fast-forward. According to Luke, in these three weeks Jesus has been circumcised, named, presented to God at the temple, praised by Simeon, prophesied by Anna, and moved back to Nazareth with his family to “grow and become strong and fill up with wisdom and God's favor.” (2:29) According to Matthew, he and his family have also taken a side trip to Egypt. Mark doesn't fool with Jesus until after he's grown up and been baptized. And John, in today's lectionary text, skips all the early years and plunges right into Jesus' first miracle, turning water to wine at the wedding at Cana. So this week, just in case there's any doubt in anybody's mind that the holy spawn so recently deposited in a manger really is the Messiah, we're slamming right to his very first impossibility.

Me, I'd rather cradle the baby a little bit longer. Pause for a while in the cocoon of his innocence. Gaze at his sleepy eyes, cuddle his tiny swaddled body, breathe in the sweetness of his little baby scent. Me, I'd just as soon hold the three-week-old baby Jesus close to my chest a little while longer, and keep him safe, and warm, and happy.

Life can be so mean and harsh. And too soon it's fixin' to be very harsh, indeed, to this little baby boy born in Bethlehem such a short while ago. But then, I suppose there's no shielding Jesus from life. Or from suffering and death, either, I guess. It doesn't take long for a parent to figure out that not all the love in the world can protect

our progeny from their path. All any of us can we really do is trust heaven to protect them along the way.

In any case, here, today, in John's story, Jesus is all grown up and attending a party, a wedding party, to which his Mom and his pals are also invited. It's a big celebration of the union of some friends of theirs, with all the lavish sharing of food and drink that we experience at big weddings today.

Only it's late in the day at this party and the drink has given out. The wine is all gone and there's no sign of the guests getting ready to leave. How embarrassing for the host! Everyone knows you're supposed to plan for more people than that rsvp. Obviously neither Ann nor Judy had anything to do with the preparations. Of course, we know it wasn't a Presbyterian gathering anyway, because wine is served, and plenty of it. And not from boxes, either. This was the good stuff, ordered special from Tower Liquor in downtown Jerusalem, and the guests are guzzling it like there was no tomorrow.

Only now it's giving out and Mother Mary is mortified. Cannot *believe* the parents of the bride didn't plan any better than this! But remember Mary? Tough little Palestinian child-bride who rises to whatever occasion presents itself? Well, she's 30 years older now and there's just not a whole lot she can't handle.

So she turns to her boy (Jesus may be 30 but he's still her boy) and announces to him, "Son, they have no wine!" And as Jesus well knows, that's mom-speak for "So, take care of it!"

"Woman," he says. Like he thinks he's a grown-up when he's talking to his mama. "Woman," he says, "what's that to you or me?"

Mary rolls her eyes and gives him that “You may be the Messiah but I changed your diapers” glare.

Jesus tries again: “My hour has not yet come,” he says.

Mary shakes her head.

“My hour not yet come.” As if Jesus were in charge of timing. As if anybody besides God were in charge of timing. Like try discovering a little intrauterine surprise a couple of months *before* your wedding. “Give me a break,” thinks Mary. “My boy still has a lot to learn.”

Professor Gail O’Day, in her commentary on this passage, suggests that Jesus is not being rude to his mama, just asserting his freedom from all human control.¹ Not a mother herself, Professor O’Day is apparently unaware that children routinely assert their freedom from all human control. Mary is unimpressed. Why waste words? She knows what Jesus is capable of. Timing. Humph.

She turns to the servants. “Do whatever he tells you,” she says, and walks away.

Jesus sighs. “Fill the jars with water,” he says. And so they do.

“Now draw some out and take it to the steward.” And so they do that, too.

And WOW! It’s great wine! Chateau Lafitte Rothschild, ought ought 30, a VERY good year. The steward brags on it. The guests delight in it. The hosts beam about it. And Mary just smiles. It’s been a great party, John’s got something to write about, and generations will have confirmed for them what they already know about Jesus.

And does this story confirm what we already know about Jesus?

¹ The Women’s Bible Commentary, eds Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, “John” by Gail O’Day, p. 295.

Why, sure it does. For we already know that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the one sent to redeem creation. And most of us have heard years and years worth of tales about Jesus' transformative powers, his radical interventions, his uncanny ability to take care of business, to make things better. Lift the oppressed, heal the sick, outwit the Saducees, why Jesus is all about that sort of thing. In fact, given the spectrum of Jesus' miracles in the gospels, turning a little water into wine to make his mama happy doesn't seem all that notable over against, say, raising Jairus' daughter from the dead. Yet not only does the gospel writer of John choose to *include* this quiet, unnoticed, even reluctant backroom behavior of Jesus' at the wedding at Cana, it's the first story he offers to nail Jesus' identity (no pun intended) for John's readers.

John, who has just proclaimed Jesus as the Word of God, the light in the darkness, the One through whom all things came into being, the One closest to the heart of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, decides to tell first the story, not of Jesus healing the sick, lifting the oppressed, raising the dead or debating with the devil before great power and authorities, but of quietly executing an ordinary, unnoticed, little miracle in the back room of a party because his mama made him.

I love that. To me, both the content and the placement of the story tell more about Jesus as man and as God than just about any other gospel tale. For John's story of the wedding in Cana reveals what Jesus is like when nobody's looking. When nobody's trying to follow Jesus or understand him or worship him or dismiss him or kill him or even observe what he's up to. In fact, when nobody but his mama's paying him

the least bit of attention and even she leaves, that's when, in this story, Jesus does his mysterious, transformative thing, unbeknownst to everyone.

“...the steward knows he's sampling good wine, but he doesn't know where it came from. The servants know where it came from, but they don't know it's wine, at least not from their own experience. And one wonders if the wedding guests even know a miracle has occurred! Jesus' later miracles generally occur in plain sight, with everyone present aware of and amazed by what has taken place. But his miracle at Cana unfolds so quietly, hardly anyone even knows something important has happened! Only in the very last verse of the story does John suggest that the disciples themselves become aware through this event of the life-giving power of God through Jesus Christ.² And that's probably because Jesus told them.

Yet, I've seen it happen. Haven't you? Not always and not everywhere but every great once in a while, Jesus just sneaking in the most ordinary moments of our lives and doing his quiet, curious transformative thing?

A shift of awareness. A flash of forgiveness. A letting go. A giving up. A *lightening* up. A pitching in. A sharing. Some fleet glimpse of the Kingdom when we least expect it. Water to wine.

Yesterday when I got up to the dreariness of a cold, rainy day, I planned to hit the computer to work on my sermon as soon as I finish my devotions. [Sure, Friday is my sermon writing day but I don't think I've ever finished a sermon in one day.] So I sat down feeling kind of glum and lit my candle and began my practice and I could feel myself spiraling down. Do any of you know that feeling? It's not a good one.

² Texts for Preaching, ed. Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994, p.110.

I started thinking about my sermon. You're not supposed to think about stuff during centering prayer, at least for long, but I always do. Water to wine – what's that *really* about, I wonder. I start my sit-ups and my stretches, pray for Emory Church on my right leg, family and friends on the left.

If I finish my sermon before nightfall, I'll have time for a movie. Glad I didn't sign up to work on the house today.

The house! Omigosh! Folks have been working on Ms. Brown's house all morning! Man, I sure wouldn't want to be out there in that rain.

Until somewhere between my forty-ninth and fiftieth sit-up, God said, "You can write a sermon or you can *be* one. Go join the folks at Ms. Brown's."

I can't, I said, I gotta write my sermon!

Go join the folks at Ms. Brown's.

There'll never be time for a movie.

Go join the folks at Ms. Brown's.

It's such a nasty day.

Go join the folks at Ms. Brown's.

I'll be up 'til one.

Go join the folks at Ms. Brown's.

All right!!!

So I went and joined the folks at Ms. Brown's. Linling went with me. We washed walls. For three hours.

And I don't know, something happened, at least for me. Not right away. First we had to fuss about which walls to wash and where to get the water to wash with. But

then a few hours into our work, Linling braving the ladder on my left, and Lillian mastering the grime on my right, me in the middle cross-legged on top of the refrigerator, for a moment there it felt like Jesus had just slipped in and done his water to wine thing.

I don't know how he does it, what he adds or takes away or rearranges to make of an ordinary moment something extraordinary. I just know that the One who turned ordinary water into Chateau Lafitte Rothschild that day in Cana, once in a while turns ordinary you and me into something more than we are on our own. Once in a while this newly born, eventually grown, finally dead, but ultimately risen, Redeemer of Creation takes the raw material of who and how we usually are, and makes something special.

Naming it is bound to sound trite and result in silly stories about washing walls. Or goofy generosity. Foolish forgiveness or senseless sharing. Honoring a martyr by working on an old lady's house, or changing the world one coin at a time. That sort of thing.

But I tell you, there's one place where we in the Presbyterian tradition count on Jesus to do his water to wine thing as a matter of course, and that is in the calling, ordaining and installing of elders. After all, who of us, really, is qualified to be a teaching or ruling elder of the church? Who among us is qualified to be set aside for God's work as a governor, a policy maker, a spiritual leader?

But then again, that water at Cana didn't turn itself to wine. It was Jesus who acted on it. It was Jesus who called something out of that water such that it became the stuff of delight and nourishment and celebration.

Just as Jesus acts on, and calls something out of, us when we are elected to the office of elder. None of us “qualifies;” only Jesus is able to transform our ordinary selves into special servants of God.

The first revelation in the gospel of John of Jesus’ life-giving power takes place in an ordinary place among ordinary people.³ By changing water to wine, Jesus takes what is ordinary and transforms it into something exquisite, valuable, satisfying. Mystics of many faiths have a field day through the ages with the spiritual metaphor of wine. Perhaps, John, too, intends such existential headiness. But I really think he’s just talking about what Jesus can do with an afternoon of wall washing, or a handful of elder wannabes, or a disciple-nurturing community. .

Still, there’s a good bit mystery around John’s accounting of Jesus’ first miracle – his behavior toward his Mom, his initial reluctance to help out, the relative secrecy of his actions. But perhaps, as one commentator suggests, “with regard to Jesus’ first miracle..., it is better to allow the loose ends, the puzzles, and the uncertainties to shine forth, recalling that this is but the beginning of the story!”⁴

Today we stand only at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry on earth. Just three short weeks ago we witnessed Jesus’ birth, and in five weeks hence, we will begin preparing for his death. Perhaps all we’re really meant to understand about Jesus turning water to wine, is that we’re in this story together.

To the glory of God. Amen.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p. 111.