

*Holy Happiness*

John 2:1-11

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As I mentioned several weeks ago, this story of the wedding at Cana is associated with Epiphany, the manifestation of God. And it acquired this distinction because, as the gospel notes, it was the first of his signs and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him. Which begs the question whether they believed in him before this.

Jesus spent the first chapter of John collecting his disciples, but all he said to them was, “Come and see.” So they don’t really know what they’ve gotten themselves into. Jesus has intrigued them, but they are unclear on the details. Now Jesus and his disciples have all been invited to this wedding, and that does give an interesting background to his comment to his mother, “My hour has not yet come.” Maybe this wasn’t the situation Jesus had in mind for when he’d lay out his agenda to his band of new disciples. And surely the disciples are scratching their heads. “Okay, I’ve cast aside my nets, I’ve come to see, and here we are...at a wedding. Nobody told me formal wear was required.”

None of the commentators I read mentioned the disciples in this story. Instead, many of them focus on the issue of need: that Mary identified a need and asked Jesus to respond to it, something Jesus was hesitant to do. These commentators talk about Mary’s compassion for the needy around her, and they fret over Jesus’ reluctance to respond, hinting at greater implications. Is God sometimes hesitant to respond to our needs?

But all this focus on the need got me puzzling, are these people reading the same story I’m reading? They’re at a party and they ran out of booze! An unfortunate turn of events, but I have a really hard time seeing it as a dire need that rouses Mary’s compassion and presents the dilemma of theodicy about how there can be evil in the world if God is good. Excuse me? This isn’t the Hebrews on the brink of starvation in the wilderness. This isn’t a devastating earthquake in Haiti, one of the poorest nations in the world. This is a bunch of party goers who ran out of the happy juice! I’m beginning to understand why Jesus might have been hesitant to act. It hardly seems like the time or place for the manifestation of God in the world. I can hear Jesus hissing, “But Mom, my hour has not yet come! Ix-nay on the iracles-may!”

But Mary doesn’t listen to his objections. The evangelist doesn’t record if Mary rolled her eyes or pinched Jesus’ ear. She just tells the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” As far as she’s concerned, it’s a done deal. Mother knows best, and Jesus will follow through if he knows what’s good for him.

Yet this raises another question: how does Mary know Jesus is even capable of such a miracle? This is the first of his signs, right? Ah, but it’s the first of his *public* signs. He must have done something like this before, but privately, in the comfort of his own home, for the benefit of his family. We might imagine a time in Jesus’ youth or childhood, the Sabbath approaching, and Mary suddenly cries, “Oy vey! We’re out of wine! How can we say *Kiddush* without wine!” And Jesus says, “I’ll take care of it, Mom,” and zap – the water jug is instantly filled with Manishewitz. There is in fact an entire gospel filled with stories of the kinds of miracles a toddler messiah might work. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas did not make it into Bible canon, and with good reason, but it does make the point that Jesus’ family would have been exposed early on to Jesus’ unique talents. So Mary would think nothing of asking Jesus to step in and get the party going once more.

But Jesus is hesitant. That hesitation has confounded many a commentator, but when I look at it this way, I can see where Jesus might have been coming from. His messiahhood is about far more than parlor tricks. He's collected disciples now, he's ready to get started, but making miracle wine for a wedding just doesn't quite have theological weight, you know?

Today we might be tempted to find religious significance in the fact that it's a wedding. Even though we Protestants don't technically see marriage as a sacrament, we nevertheless do see it as a religious event. But marriage only became a religious ceremony about one thousand years ago, well after Jesus' time. The fact is that the wedding at Cana was an entirely secular event. Not really the setting you would expect for a miracle, much less for the epiphany, the manifestation of God in the world!

And yet, in the end Jesus does what his mother asks. He turns that water into wine, and not just Manishevit, but a full-bodied Shiraz with fruity bouquet and a hint of asparagus. He takes his chance for a big grand coming out party and squanders it on an ordinary wedding. And that causes me to wonder: did mother, after all, know best? And Jesus recognized that?

Indeed, what does it say about us, that we think Jesus' first public miracle should be grandiose and somber? More along the lines of rescuing the quake victims of Haiti rather than indulging drunken partygoers? We usually decry foxhole religion, where people only turn to God in the bad times. And yet, doesn't that very concern underlie our own sense of what religion is about? That if God is worth anything, it's because God comes through for us in the bad times. God will wipe away every tear and death shall be no more. An image much more like what we hear in Isaiah: God will be our vindication. God will rescue us. No more will we be called Forsaken, but now My Delight Is in You. And all of that is certainly true. If God is not there in the worst times, then what good is God? God does indeed respond to our needs. But maybe that's not all God is good for.

I wonder if the miracle of the wedding of Cana is meant to remind us that God is there for the good times, too. Maybe it's showing us that God is about more than just pulling our fat out of the fire and rescuing us from calamity. After all, what is it that we are rescued for? Perhaps Jesus is trying to tell us that God is about so much more. A party, a joyous celebration, where the wine flows freely, and the very best is saved for last. Why shouldn't an ordinary wedding provide the setting for God's manifestation in the world? And if we turn our noses up at such a miracle, if we sniff that it's not dignified enough, then doesn't that make us party poopers? Soren Kierkegaard observed that, "Christ turned water into wine, but the Church has succeeded in doing something even more difficult: it has turned wine into water." Or as another commentator put it, "God does not want our religion to be too holy to be happy in."

Now there's a challenge for us: too holy to be happy in! I think about the people I have known in my life who were holy, and yes, I've known a few. I daresay you have known one or two yourself. And I ask you: were they dour? Sour-faced? Somber? Not the ones I've known. What impressed me most about them was their happiness. Not to say they couldn't be sad or angry or serious when occasion required it, but their default state was one of happiness. Enjoyment. Simple pleasures. People who know how to have a good time, and who don't need alcohol or drugs to do it. People who enjoy whatever is happening at the time, who find pleasure in the people around them. They don't need flashy miracles and signs to let the good times roll. They can be happy anywhere.

Commentators have often noted that the jars used for this miracle were not ordinary water jars. They were used for the religious rituals of purification. The water in those jars was used to wash away uncleanness and make people fit for God and for society. These are the jars Jesus chose for his miracle. He didn't have to choose them. After all, if they'd run out

of wine, it means there were empty wine jars lying around. But he chose the jars for purification. He took the vessels that rescue us from trauma, and turned them into vessels of joy and celebration. For what other purpose are we rescued and purified?

The jars were empty. They had already served their purpose. Now Jesus filled them up, giving them a new purpose, taking them to the next level. We might even say he fulfilled them. And how's that for an image: that the ultimate purpose of all our religious rituals is not just to cleanse us of sin, but to restore us to joy and give us pleasure. I think of a hymn that says, "Religion never was designed to make our pleasures less." We're so full of the Protestant work ethic that such a notion seems a bit scandalous if not downright blasphemous. Religion isn't supposed to make us happy! It's not supposed to be a party like at some wedding!

Yet that's exactly what Jesus would appear to be saying when he finally chose to work his first miracle at that wedding. That's an epiphany we all ought to take to heart.