

“Wedding Drama”

Reading: *Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11*

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It's a rare wedding that goes off without a hitch. It seems like there's always some drama somewhere. We could spend all morning going around the room, telling horror stories of weddings you've been in or been to. Someone's running late, someone's off in a restroom crying, someone spills something all over the place, someone ends up not speaking to someone else, someone says something they shouldn't have said. And it's not too surprising, given how much emotional energy, time, and money typically goes into a wedding. Even a low-key wedding is charged with expectation and ripe for drama. I've heard of ministers dropping dead halfway through the wedding. There was a wedding at the church I grew up in where the candelabra somehow caught the floor on fire. And that's not to mention the stories you hear of family feuds erupting into fistfights (or worse). And since I know some of you are wondering, no, Pastor Carey and I don't have a really juicy story from our wedding; ours actually went pretty well.

But even in antiquity, weddings could be full of drama. The wedding Jesus attended in John 2 surely looked very different than the weddings we have today; they had a much different culture than ours. We could go into great detail exploring what a wedding ceremony looked like in first century Judaism, but even though the ceremony and the traditions looked quite different, you already know the drama as it unfolds, and you already know the characters in the drama. It's a wedding: the bride and groom are excited, there's a group of friends over there who have had too much to drink and are talking too loudly, there are some aunts and uncles sulking in the corner because this wedding is bringing out some family drama from twenty years ago, and — most importantly for our purposes today — there's a wedding coordinator panicking in the kitchen because someone didn't plan adequately.

It can cause high drama behind the scenes when a guest brings an uninvited date to a wedding dinner, or when one family shows up without returning their RSVP, and suddenly the count for dinner has been thrown off. Here we have a major faux pas on the part of the family: someone didn't order enough wine. See? Things haven't changed that much in two thousand years; that was just as much cause for embarrassment in that time as it would be for many people today, though not, of course, at a Wesleyan wedding. And of course, as one of Jesus' most well-known miracles, He ends up saving the party and saving the family from embarrassment by miraculously transforming ordinary water into the best wine. The image of water turning into wine has entered the culture to the point that people who know very little about Jesus are likely to have heard of water turning into wine; it's an easy punch line for jokes.

But it's kind of a strange story. It's awkward for us Wesleyans since we take a stand for abstinence from alcohol, recognizing the massive damage it can do not only to those who drink it, but also to their families and even complete strangers. So it's awkward for us that this is Jesus' first miracle, to create this thing we've taken a stance against. But more than that, it's just an unexpected sort of miracle in the first place. In John's gospel, which is the only one of the four gospels to include this story, the ministry of Jesus is sort of structured around seven miracles or signs. Some of them are familiar to us from the other gospels, or are at least similar to other miracles from other gospels, while some of them are unique to John's gospel. Maybe you've seen the sketch they use on *Sesame*

Street from time to time: “One of these things is not like the others.” The other six miracles in John’s gospel are Jesus doing the kinds of things you would expect God With Us to do: healing people of incurable diseases, walking on water, miraculously multiplying food to feed thousands of people, and even raising the dead. Compared to those, changing water into wine seems, well, inconsequential; it’s certainly impressive, but what difference does it make, or what does it really tell us about God? Is it really a miracle, or is it just a parlor trick? This wedding at Cana is something we often mention in the context of our wedding ceremonies as one place where we see God’s blessing on marriage, but is that all there is for us to learn from this story?

There’s actually quite a lot lurking just beneath the surface, as you might have guessed since John thought it was important enough to include in his account of Jesus’ life. This story of wedding drama tells us about the character of God, and it sets the stage for the ministry of Jesus, and it gives us wisdom for our lives of prayer. It shows us who God is, it shows us what He is about, and it shows us how we can relate to Him in response.

First of all, it tells us a lot about the character of God, or at least it illustrates what we see about God from elsewhere in His story. Jesus is God With Us, God incarnate as a human, and so when we see Jesus reveal His priorities, we are seeing the priorities of God on display. When we see the character of Jesus revealed, we are seeing the character of God. So we see Jesus, His mother, and His disciples attending this wedding, and we see Jesus caring enough about the wedding party and the guests to perform a miracle in order to prevent social embarrassment and shame. It seems like such an insignificant event, especially to be the first of the seven miracles that John relies on so heavily in his gospel to reveal the person of Christ. We don’t even have a clue whose wedding this is: some have suggested it’s someone in Mary’s family, which is reasonable, but we don’t know. We’re not even quite sure where it took place; the location of Cana is disputed. It is just a wedding, the sort of thing that happens and has happened all the time. It’s a very ordinary special event.

And yet God was not ashamed to make this the first miracle of Jesus. Jesus did not think this was too insignificant to be “the first of the signs through which He revealed His glory.” This drama was not too embarrassing or too worldly for God. There’s not really an indication that very many people attending the party apart from Jesus’ disciples knew what was going on, or knew that Jesus was responsible for saving the day. Was it a waste of a miracle to save a party? Was it a waste of a miracle if almost no one there saw it happen and was amazed? Was it a waste of a miracle if the only thing it accomplished that day was to save a newly married couple from embarrassment? Apparently God, the Creator of the universe, did not think so. Apparently this was not beneath His notice. Apparently He was not too big to care.

And so we see revealed in this a God who consecrates joy. To consecrate something is to make it holy, to set it apart as something special. I realize that’s a tricky thing to say; this is not God’s endorsement of drinking alcohol as a means to having a good time. Our world has problems with alcohol, to be sure, and we as the church need to serve as a witness to a better way. But Jesus saw a joyous celebration as worthy of His time, and as a worthy stage for His glory to begin to break through. I love that Jesus used jars used for ceremonial washing for this miracle: vessels of solemn cleansing become vessels of celebration. Frivolity is not too frivolous to be worth a miracle. Jesus came to be known as a friend of sinners, one who was not ashamed to be seen with partygoers. We can safely assume He did not get drunk, but we can also assume He was not dour and boring at the

parties. That doesn't mean that we all have to be the life of every party, but it does mean that knowing God is not meant to be dull, lifeless, sour, and miserable. God consecrates joy.

We see in this story a revelation of the mission Jesus has come to accomplish. It shows us something about who God is, but also what He came to do. Mary, Jesus' mother, is the one who pushes Him to do something about this wedding drama, and He seems hesitant at first. "Why do you involve me?" He asks. "My hour has not yet come." He does not consider this drama too insignificant for Him, but He also knows that He is embarking on a particular path, and He's not necessarily eager to get to its end. Jesus came for a purpose; there is an "hour" yet to come that will reveal the glory of God in a new way. That mission involves the revealing of God's power among His people, certainly. This is, after all, a miracle, a demonstration of the power of God over His creation that evokes wonder and awe. If you think about it, though, there's actually nothing miraculous about water turning into wine. We do it all the time; we just use grapes and yeast and quite a bit more time. This is not just Jesus doing something supernatural, it's Jesus doing something natural in a supernatural way; He's demonstrating that He is Lord over nature. This is the Lord of the world present in the world.

He is the powerful presence of God here for a reason. He came filled with compassion, heading for a certain "hour," a culmination of His work. Weddings in the Bible are usually filled with significance when they appear, even though this one might seem to be normal. One of our readings for today was from Isaiah 62, one of the passages where God describes His relationship with His people in terms of a marriage. It's a deliberate choice on God's part to build a relationship of love and faithfulness with His people, a relationship that is created, rather than naturally occurring. God goes out of His way to marry this people. When God speaks of what He will do to make all things right, to bring history to its fulfillment and re-establish His reign over creation, one of the images that gets used in the Bible is the image of a feast, a party, and even a wedding feast. Here at this wedding at Cana, Jesus gives us the first glimpse of His glory by giving us a foreshadowing, a reminder, that there is a greater feast yet to come, that there will be a never-ending feast in celebration of God's powerful, world-changing relationship of love and faithfulness. Jesus blesses this feast because He is working toward the greater feast.

So in this wedding drama we see much about God's character and the mission of Jesus. But we also see, through the actions of Mary, insight for how we should respond to God's character and mission. As the mother of Jesus, Mary certainly has a special relationship with Him, but even so, she guides us in the nature of prayer, which is how we approach God most regularly. Once again, though many people might consider this wedding drama to be too frivolous to bother God with, Mary doesn't hesitate to bring the matter to Jesus. I don't know about you, but I often find myself thinking that I ought to only bring the big things to God in prayer, as though prayer is an imposition on God's time, so I'd better choose my prayer requests wisely. But the implication of that thinking is that most of what goes on in my life and in our world doesn't really matter to God. The reality is that God cares about our lives, and He wants us to be in conversation with Him about our lives. There is no matter too small to escape His attention, and He might just surprise you with what He's able to do through the little things in life.

And more than that, Mary gives us an example of how to approach God in prayer. She begins with a boldness that could only come from being Jesus' mother: she simply comes up to Him and says, "They have no more wine." It's one of those statements that is more than just a statement of fact, of

course. She boldly brings the matter to Him, knowing that He is able to do something about it. But then, rather than dictating to Him what He should do, she trusts Him with the matter: “Do whatever He tells you,” she says to the servants. It’s not unlike the Lord’s Prayer, where we boldly pray for our daily bread and to be delivered from temptation, but we also pray, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Bold, yet trusting. The boldness of a child adopted into the family, but the trust of one who knows that the Father knows best.

Out of this wedding drama, this strange setting for the first of Jesus’ miracles, we see the character of God revealed, and we see the mission of Jesus revealed, and we see our response demonstrated. God is in the midst of a mighty work of redemption, a work that will result in the gathering of His family in eternal celebration of His goodness. But that doesn’t mean that He’s too busy or too important for us to bring our daily concerns to Him. He invites us to come and trust Him with our lives.



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