

Extravagant Grace

Preached on The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Jan. 24. 2021
Text: John 2: 1-11

Today is the Third Sunday after Epiphany, and we look at the final event commemorated in the ancient Epiphany celebrations: Jesus's first miracle at the Wedding of Cana. Last week we talked about one of the most important events in our Christian lives that many of us do not remember: our baptisms. This week's gospel reminds us of one of the most important events in many of our lives that we do remember: our weddings. Even if you weren't married in an Anglican church, chances are your marriage service included elements that come from the Book of Common Prayer. For English speakers, the Anglican marriage rite (or at least its beginning) is the one we all know (page 300 in the Book of Common Prayer):

Dearlly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the face of this company to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church: which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence and first miracle that he wrought in Cana of Galilee, and is commended of Saint Paul to be honorable among all men...

In these few, well-known words we have an excellent summary of the theological significance and rationale for Christian marriage from Scripture:

1. It's honorable because God instituted it in Genesis 1 and 2
2. It's a mystery or sacrament signifying Christ and the Church per Ephesians 5
3. Jesus blessed it with his first miracle in today's Gospel from John 2
4. We're commanded to honor it by keeping ourselves from sexual immorality both inside and outside of marriage per Hebrews 13

In today's Gospel we're going to see how Jesus's blessing of a marriage speaks to our own marriages, but more importantly tells us something about Christ and his grace towards us as members of his Bride, the Church.

And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there: and both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage. And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come. His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it.

One thing to address at the outset is the statement of Jesus to his mother. This has caused problems for many Christians given its apparent rudeness as we encounter it in the King James Version. It seems Jesus is being very disrespectful: "Woman, what have I to

do with thee?" That is indeed a translation of the words of this common conversational phrase, but it does not in any way give the tone. While it could be delivered in an unkind way, when it was spoken gently it indicated not so much reproach but misunderstanding. Jesus undoubtedly loved and honored his mother. By calling her "woman" he is not being impolite, but is using a term of respect. It is the same word as Jesus used on the Cross to address Mary as he left her in the care of John (John 19:26). In the Orient, a person calling his mother woman, was a customary, dignified, and respectful form of address. It is difficult to translate, but its sense might better be captured by saying "Dear woman." We might therefore translate his whole response as: "Dear woman, what does this have to do with me? My time has not yet come"

Before trying to speculate on Jesus's thinking here, let's note a few other things in this passage as well. First, this was likely a family affair, with most of the attendees being kinfolk to some extent or another, suggesting that Mary and Jesus were probably related to the couple. It certainly seems from the text that Mary was invited first, and Jesus and his disciples came later, possibly as her guests. Tradition has it that Mary was the aunt of the bride and so might have been in charge of the wedding festivities. Whether that is true or not, it is likely that Mary had a position of some responsibility here. She had something to do with the arrangements, for she was worried when the wine ran out; and she had authority enough to order the servants to do whatever Jesus told them to do.

Second, there is no mention of Joseph. The explanation most probably is that by this time Joseph was dead. It would seem that Joseph died quite soon, and that the reason why Jesus lived thirty years in Nazareth was that he had to help support his mother.

Third, for a Jewish feast wine was essential. "Without wine," said the Rabbis, "there is no joy." It was not that people were drunken, but in the East wine was an essential. Drunkenness was in fact a great disgrace, and they actually drank their wine in a mixture composed of two parts of wine to three parts of water. At any time the failure of provisions would have been a problem. But for the provisions to fail at a wedding would be a terrible humiliation for the bride and the bridegroom which they would never live down.

Let's recap then. This wedding is a family affair in the small village of Cana. Jesus has just embarked on his public ministry. He has been the dutiful son to his mother for many years and supported her after Joseph died. But he has to leave that role as no longer where his primary focus has to be. He has to be about his Father's business. But even given that, he has come to join in celebrating the wedding of this young couple. He cares about ordinary people and what family honor means to them, and so doesn't want to eclipse the nuptials or draw attention to a problem.

So perhaps Jesus's response to his mother now might make more sense now. Given that Jesus knew his mother very well—and she him—he might have discerned that she was presuming to know the time for announcing his true identity. The expression "What have I to do with thee?" implies that the one thus addressed has exceeded the bounds of what properly concerns him or her. So Jesus is not expressing indifference, but directing

his mother away from asking for a premature public announcement of concerning him. Jesus did honor his mother. But now He was no longer a private individual, and Mary could now see the limits this placed on her authority over him. Jesus, in his newly inaugurated public ministry, is making clear the distinction between His relation to Mary as the Son of Man and his preeminent relation to the Father as the Son of God. His love for her was unchanged; but now He must labor from day to day under the direction of His heavenly Father.

This helps explain why Mary did not see Jesus's reply as a refusal. She knew and trusted her son without reservation, and so serves as a good example for all Christians. She didn't second-guess the Lord, or push her agenda as if he were just a rubber stamp. This is evident in her instruction to the servants: "Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it". She was satisfied that Jesus would supply the need in His own good time and way.

Now there were six stone jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them to the brim. And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, "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." This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

St. John calls the miracle at Cana "the first of his signs." In the Gospel of John, there are seven "signs," each revealing Jesus' Messianic character and glory in an extraordinary miracle. In today's Gospel, we see the miracle in the exceptionally large quantity of high-quality wine. Six stone jars with twenty or thirty gallons of wine becomes the equivalent of 600 to 900 bottles of wine. There are a couple of important spiritual lessons here. First, Jesus did not attempt to overpower people with his miracles and grab all the attention. He handled things discretely, letting the servants know, but not the master of ceremonies. The just-wed couple did not lose face. Second, we see Jesus here as blessing marriage as an honorable and joyous estate. Just as he nourishes his body, the Church, so he nourishes marriage if we but trust and obey him, just as Mary did. In a Christian marriage, Christ should rule. If he does, God's design for marriage will be more and more realized.

It can also be helpful when considering this event, to see it as an allegory. In the Old Testament, wine was a sign of joy and God's blessing. Running out of wine could be a symbol of the barrenness of 1st Century Judaism. We need Christ to give joy, blessing, and life to our worship and faith. St. Augustine says that the tasteless water represented the Old Testament Scriptures, while the savory wine represented the Gospel. When Jesus opened the Scriptures to the disciples of the Road to Emmaus, showing how the Old

Testament was really about him, the disciples said that their hearts “burned” within them. Augustine says that they metaphorically became “intoxicated” with joy as Jesus turned the water of the Old Testament into the wine of the Gospel. He writes:

When he turned the water itself into wine, he showed us that the ancient Scripture comes from him too; for by his order the jars were filled. This Scripture, too, is indeed from the Lord. But it has no taste if Christ is not understood in it.

Just as Jesus did not let the wedding hosts run out of wine, but rather provided for the feast extravagantly, so does he provide for us. He gives us his grace extravagantly. Indeed, if it weren't for an extravagant grace, sinners like you and I could not be saved. Martin Bucer writes:

As he would not allow these guests to lack wine, so also he will not allow us to lack anything—especially spiritual goods—related to our salvation. These are certain and bequeathed to us by the Spirit of God.

And speaking of certain signs from God's Spirit, don't miss the sacramental imagery in the wine, which should always remind us of Christ's blood in Communion. This is a theme that the Church Fathers particularly notice. For example, St. Cyril of Jerusalem writes, “He once changed water into wine by a word of command at Cana of Galilee. Should we not believe him when he changes wine into blood?”

Every time we come to the Lord's Table, we are having a preview of the great wedding feast of the Lamb spoken of in Revelation. Every time we come to the Lord's Table, we are reminded that he is indeed our bridegroom who gave his life for us. Every time Christians are joined as man and wife by Christ in his Church, we see a picture of Christ and his church, a picture of Christ's extravagant, intoxicating grace. And every time we come to either sacrament, we hear the voice of the Church echoing our Lord's Blessed Mother, saying “Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it.”

In the Name...