

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's story of the beginning of the ministry of Jesus gets off to a very strange start. The other gospels start off with something a bit more significant, but in John? In John, the first act of ministry performed by Jesus is that he turns water into wine. Supplies wine for a party.

Somewhat strange way to start a ministry....or so it would seem to us.

But a first-century Jewish wedding in a village named Cana was a big deal. Weddings back then and there were an even bigger deal than they are now.

I know...tell that to the parents of the bride today. But, in truth, weddings in the time of Jesus had little competition....they did not have sports teams, television, movie theaters, or computer games...but they did have weddings, which were the best things going for entertainment.

And a wedding did not last for a few hours. It went on for seven days — seven days! The entire community was invited, and wine was essential to these weddings. People did not generally get drunk...as they drank wine mixed with water, and they drank in a social context. Drinking in terms of substance abuse to the point of alcoholism disease is known to have been a very rare problem for them in that time.

So, here we have this young couple, just married, and they ran out of wine in the middle of their wedding feast....clearly a major social disaster in the making. And, ok...it may not be as dramatic as the future miracles performed by Jesus....raising the dead, bringing sight to the blind. Those are more serious in terms of their life changing effect. But, here he is with Mary, his mother, and the problem of the moment presents itself.

She is a sharp one, that Mary. She notices when the last wine jug is emptied and wants to prevent a social disaster. A blot on the future of this fine young couple. She brings the matter to the attention of Jesus...and, at first, he seems to shrug it off.

Most of you have heard or read this passage many times, but have you ever wondered why the writer of this gospel makes a point of recording this little back-and-forth between Jesus and his mother? She sees the problem clearly, and points it out to him...worried about the party that will crash without the wine. His reply? I ask you to think about it.

Is not his response similar to what all we parents hear from our kids when we want them to do something? When it is our idea, and not theirs? "Ok, ok, I'll do it right after I finish this video game." Or, "Yeah, yeah, maybe tomorrow". Or, how about, "Hey, why should I care? I am not ready?"

Is not this last one: "Hey, why should we care? I am not ready." essentially what he says back to his mother, Mary? I am not ready to brush my teeth. Clean my room. Go to bed. Do my homework?

As we get older, and have children and grandchildren of our own, we realize that it is natural progression of human life.

It takes time to recognize self-awareness. That is the essence of maturity. We have to grow, over

time, into seeing and living into the world around us. Hearing the loving voices of our mentors and caring adults. Figuring out that, at life in general, “looking out only for number 1”...as we do when we are little children...is not the safest, healthiest, and happiest way for good old number 1.

The next intriguing part of this gospel is that, even though Jesus says “no way”, Mary goes off and tells the servants to “Do whatever he tells you”, which presumes either they had a further conversation that is not written here, or that she has faith that he will do the right thing (in her opinion), regardless of what he said.

Either way, she is right. Jesus eventually tells the staff to fill with water a half dozen big stone jars and drag them over to the banquet manager. They fill up those jars, the size of small barrels, and roll them over to the banquet manager, who takes a sip....only to find it is really good wine, and that there is enough to float a boat. The equivalent of some 750 bottles.

It is an odd way to start a ministry....or is it?

First, what Jesus does is an act of compassion, meeting the needs of people where they are. Sure, it does say something about the significance of marriage in the eyes of God. But something more is going on here, something that concerns everybody, not just the married among us or those in need of immediate help. John's Gospel speaks of this episode as a sign, one in a series of signs about Jesus found in that Gospel....and when we look at the wedding episode or any of the other signs in John, what stands out is: some people understand their significance, and some people do not.

First, the recorded reluctance of Jesus to act in the first place, and Mary's statement to the servants to get ready for action. In fact, you and I have these very subtle, “give and take” sessions with God all the time...the Holy Spirit whispering to us to do, or not do, something, and we respond right away...or we do not, right away. But the Spirit eats away at us, until hopefully that call gets answered. And this gospel shares that, in his complete humanity which we often forget or do not understand or otherwise ignore, Jesus is no different from you or me. God among us, alright...in a very real way.

Also, consider the cast of characters at the wedding celebration. Mary, the disciples and the serving staff apparently catch on to the wonder of water changed into wine...but, on the other hand, the banquet manager, the groom and his bride, and most of their guests apparently do not have a clue about what is going on. But, still, the wine is there for them as well as for the others. We see that in our lives as well...blessings all around for all, whether the next guy knows it or deserves it. God's love for all.

Finally, this story reveals a secret about life....and that is: miracles happen. That there are signs of Jesus at work, and appear all around us. They happen whether we see them or not, whether we hear them or not. Whether or not we acknowledge them. They benefit us whether or not we notice them. Yet it is a joy to see these signs for what they are and believe in the one to whom they point.

We should think of miracles as not being weird exceptions to the orderly laws of the universe. They have the same origin as those laws, and they teach us the context of those laws. George Macdonald says in this regard: “The miracles of Jesus were the ordinary works of his father, wrought

small and swift that we might take them in.” Or consider some words of St. Augustine about this morning’s gospel: “He who made the wine that day at the marriage feast does this every year in vines. But we do not wonder at the latter because it happens every year; it has lost its marvel by its constant occurrence.”

Perhaps the Miracle of Cana story appears first in the Gospel of John because, in reality and in the sight of God, the world is a wedding celebration. Think about that. Reflect on that from this reading.

In the eyes and heart of God, life in the world is a celebration.

Jesus changes ordinary water into the wine of miracles, which is really a reflection of the way that God wants us to see, and hear, and live in the world. What does it mean for each of us to grow in grace? It is to become increasingly aware that everything in life is a miracle, a sign pointing to Christ. That all persons, and all of creation, benefit from these transformations...symbolized by this water into wine...though some persons know the cause of them, and others do not. To share our faith means this: letting others know that signs are abundant, and Jesus is the one to whom they point.

So, the vast, days-long party at Cana continues...because God sees the celebration that life really is, and says it is good. And not simply the celebration of the Eucharist here, at this table, this feast of grace, but also when we leave here to encounter Christ active throughout the wide world. He changes the ordinariness that we tend to ignore by our oversight, into the wonder that renews us and makes us glad.

Sure, there are disasters. Horrible crimes. Personal loss and pain. It can be hard to celebrate the life around us. And yet even though he wept at the death of his dear friend Lazarus, and became angry to the point of disruptive violence in the temple, and even endured his own torture and death, the life of Jesus...then and now...was and is always sustained by the love and grace that he knows in God the Father, and the answers to prayers that heaven would begin to come to the earth.

Going from the water of this earth into the wine of heaven that indicates the celebration of life every day, every moment, in the very presence of God....known to us in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.