

SERMONSECOND  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

460 East Main Street

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*Nudging the God of Abundance*

John 2:1-11

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Something always goes wrong at a wedding. I know you already know that around here, because when I was looking at the mailboxes in the church office, I saw a slot for the Wedding Committee, which contained a box of safety pins—something everyone scrambles for at a wedding.

But not all challenges at weddings are so easily overcome.

A number of years ago, I took part in one that I don't think I'll ever forget. The venue had a lovely room overlooking downtown Nashville, but it took some work to make it a great space for a wedding. But that couple did the work, and their vision came to life in that place.

The wedding itself was flawless and offered a deeply faithful ceremony bearing witness to the love of God. But between the end of the rehearsal on Friday night until about 22 seconds before the wedding began, it was chaos.

The band's equipment got stolen.

The groom didn't have saline solution so he soaked his contacts in Visine, which he quickly learned was a big mistake.

The venue didn't get the room set up on time, and so all the guests crowded into a lobby waiting for a word to come up. The staff told them the family didn't want them up there yet.

There were two other large activities going on in another section of that venue, one of them a costume contest, so it was an interesting collection of folks milling around.

Then the elevator was ruled out of order. It was only three long flights up.

They forgot to open the secondary parking area, so folks were stuck. The father of the bride was out directing traffic 7 minutes before he was to walk his daughter down the aisle.

His mother—in a wheelchair—arrived, and they miraculously got the elevator going. But the father of the bride missed them while he was running down the stairs, which prompted a revolving door of folks going to look for the one who was sent to look for the one who was sent.

By the time I had the men lined up to walk in, we were about the only ones left. The father of the bride is standing there panting and sweating, and my “may peace be with you” did little to comfort him.

It was about a minute to our entrance that this other guy came up and starting asking me where he was supposed to be. “I'm playing music,” and we spent the next 30 seconds figuring out that he was supposed to play the processional.

Now not all weddings are like that one, but trust me on this: Something always happens at a wedding that no one planned for.

Which is what makes this story from John's Gospel seem so familiar. A wedding has been planned, the guests have arrived, things are going according to plan—when slowly the news travels throughout the reception: they've run out of wine.

And so, at one level at least, this story seems familiar. But it doesn't take long to discover that there's something altogether different going on, and it will take our best thoughts to even begin to understand why—of all the things that Jesus did—this is the first one John chooses to tell us about. (This was the first sign.)

This story marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry in John's Gospel, and so it makes some sense that John would tell a miracle story. But why this one? We may not always understand them, but we at least know how a typical miracle story is supposed to go: Some desperate human need takes the spotlight—whether someone is in need of healing or food or safety, or maybe someone has died—and Jesus responds by doing some extraordinary act that brings an end to the desperation.

But this miracle story is different. First, there is no desperate human need. They've just run out of wine. But there's another difference: Jesus seems reluctant to act.

In noticing that, one commentator notes how this story holds up the scandal of what she calls divine reluctance. After all, when Mary tells Jesus that they've run out of wine, Jesus basically does nothing, saying, "What concern is that to me?"

Obviously, there are some good reasons Jesus may have been slow to respond.

It could be that he knew that more wine for a wedding was not exactly the definition of desperate human need.

Or it could have been that he didn't want to be seen as one who simply dispensed the goods and cash that people need.

Or it might simply be about what Jesus says so often in John's Gospel: "My hour has not yet come."

And yet, no matter the reason, there is something in us that is troubled by Jesus' hesitation. And, if his hesitation doesn't bother us, perhaps we ought to wonder why.

You see, just as Mary saw her son Jesus as one who could—and should—meet needs, so do many other followers of Jesus. Even us, I suspect.

I like the way Carol Lakey Hess reflects on this. She writes: "We see a world in need, and we believe in one who claimed to bring abundant life to those in need. In a world where for so many there is no clean water—let alone fine wine—where is the extravagance of God?"

In a world where children play in bomb craters the size of thirty-gallon jugs, why the divine reluctance?

In a world where desperate mothers must say to their small children, "We have no food," why has the hour not yet come?"

"No matter how we rationalize divine inactivity," she writes, "we still want to tug at Jesus' sleeve and say, "They have no wine."

At the center of this text, here at the very beginning of John's Gospel, is a sign, the first of many, that this Jesus is God's very presence poured out upon the earth, giving life in abundance, like new wine. This is a story which highlights the extravagant care of God.

But, this story also has a flip-side. It exposes other places and times where such extravagant care seems absent, where abundance has failed to show up. This story forces us to consider the question of how we can reconcile this story of overflowing generosity with a world of tremendous need.

I am thinking now of Yemen, the place of untold human suffering these past several years.

I'm thinking of Gaza where peace is elusive and violence seems a given.

I'm thinking of those in this community who are slipping through the widening cracks caused by a muted concern for one another and a growing sense of compassion fatigue.

In so many places and ways, people are crying out to God, "You are the one who gave us life. Why are we suffering?" And, if you listen carefully, you can almost hear Mary screaming as she nudges the God of abundance, "God, don't you see they have no wine?"

But do you ever worry that God somehow needs to be protected from the voices of people like Mary? Do you picture yourself needing to lead God through the pressing crowd, as if God were like some leader needing to be flanked by security at all turns. Do you ever find yourself wanting to protect God? To defend God against the accusations of hurting people?

If so, then let me offer you another way of looking at the need around us.

This challenging text invites us to trust so much in God's generosity and abundance that we, like Mary—the mother of Jesus—nudge God with our observation: they have no wine. Instead of protecting God, it may be just the time for us to dare to nudge the God of abundance.

Earlier this week, I had the chance to sit at the table and listen to the members of the Mission Committee here talk about the things you all did together in the past year, and the plans for the coming months. It was amazing to hear about your generosity—the money you give, the hours you invest in hands-on ministry.

And I thought to myself that night, "What an amazing thing to see how this congregation is nudging the God of abundance."

Because that's what you've been doing. It's what you've been doing for decades through Meals on Wheels, as we see our neighbors in need and remind God, saying, "They have no wine."

That's why you've been ringing bells or filling baskets or carrying in armloads of supplies in response to some cry of human pain, because you've seen these needs and in simple ways you are daring to nudge the God of abundance, "They have no wine."

That's why you've been lifting your voices in prayer, asking God to tear open the heavens and come down, to move off the pages of scripture and draw near to set things right.

My hope is that we will continue to recognize that God sends us out into our community—to the places where there is desperate need—where people have no wine—and that we are going there to be poured out in the name of Jesus.

We go to these places and we do these things for a simple reason, really. It's simply this: As this was the first sign in John's Gospel—of which there were many—the church itself is a sign as well. As the Great Ends of the Church puts it, we are an exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world—a sign of what God intends human life to be. And because of that, we will be at any place where there is human need, and we will not hesitate to nudge the God of abundance to take note of the places where "there is no wine," that our abundant God might provide.