

Saving the Best for Last

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

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We have a number of clergy in our congregation. Some of them have officiated at weddings, some of them many weddings. We all have our wedding stories, but I'll bet none of you can top this one.

Let me say this by way of disclaimer. This happened at another church in another city. I was not the pastor. I was the former pastor and was invited back to assist. I literally got there eight minutes before the service started, with just enough time to shake a couple of hands, put my robe on, and walk into the sanctuary. I tell you all this to say that I had no idea what was about to occur.

This was a little church way out in the country in Etowah County. The bride grew up in the church when I was the pastor, and she was going into the ministry. I had been a mentor for her, so she invited me to return and assist with her wedding. I had never met the groom. Nothing about him caused me think that he was a prankster.

The little sanctuary was packed. A homegrown girl was getting married. Everybody was there. The pastor of the church and I had divided the responsibilities of the service. He would do a part, and I would do a part. It happened such that I had the ending. So I invited the couple to take their nuptial kiss, and then I said, "May I present to you Mr. and Mrs. So-and-So."

They turned and faced the congregation, and then paused. At that moment I heard the hiss of the amplification system. A tape was about to play recessional music. I expected Bach, maybe Handel. You can imagine my surprise when I heard "Another One Bites the Dust" by the British rock band Queen! The recessional music for the wedding was "Another One Bites the Dust," personally chosen by the groom himself!

I was incredulous! After the wedding, I found the groom and said, "Son, what were you thinking?!" You'll never believe what he said. He

laughed and said, “Oh, I was saving the best for last.” I don’t think I want to know his definition of “best”!

Most certainly I can say this. His definition of best would be a far cry from Jesus’ definition. In our text for this morning, Jesus demonstrated the meaning of “best” with an object lesson, a big, festive object lesson. It too occurred at a wedding, the wedding in Cana of Galilee.

John is the only gospel writer to have preserved this fascinating story, and he actually opens his gospel with it. The first chapter of John is a prologue, and the last chapter is an epilogue. So John’s account of the life of Jesus begins with this wedding in Cana of Galilee, so we must assume that this story says something important about Jesus. Now you need to know this about John. The reader has to pay close attention to everything in the Gospel of John. Even the minutest details may have symbolic significance. For example, why were there six water jars at the wedding? Why not five or nine? Did it matter that the jars were stone rather than earthenware, which was more common? And what about that awkward dialogue between Jesus and his mother, who, by the way, is never called by her name, Mary, in the Gospel of John. She’s always “the mother of Jesus.”

Let’s begin with this somewhat awkward dialogue between Jesus and Mary. It is especially awkward in our English translations. Jesus and his mother were at the wedding, one of the most festive occasions in their culture. Families would scrimp and sacrifice to provide a splendid celebration at their children’s wedding, much the way some of us do today. Now John says that the wedding hosts ran out of wine—right in the middle of the festivities. This would have been awfully embarrassing to the hosts. Imagine hosting a bone-dry party.

Rather matter of factly Mary said to Jesus, “They have no wine.” Jesus rather matter of factly responded, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.” As harsh as that translation sounds, it’s even worse in the Revised Standard Version where Jesus says, “O woman, what have you to do with me?” Someone has said that this was a “surly” response from Jesus (Larry Greenfield, EthicsDaily.com). Others assure us that this language was common, and no disrespect was intended. And apparently none was taken because Mary said to one of the servants standing nearby, “Do whatever he tells you.”

What happens next is a part of the story that we need to examine carefully. John says that there were six empty stone water jars nearby. They were stone rather than earthenware because stone jars were less porous and believed to be ritually pure. These jars were used for the Jewish purification rituals. When guests arrived at the wedding, their dusty feet and hands were purified, made clean and acceptable, by washing them with this holy water. The jars held twenty to thirty gallons each, the text says, so that would have been about 150 gallons of water. That's a lot of water! Now, the careful reader of this story would expect seven jars, not six. Seven was a sacred number in Hebrew thinking. The number six represented incompleteness, insufficiency.

Jesus told the servants to fill the six stone jars with water. That amount of water must have been drawn from a nearby well. Here's a question to ponder. Was the well the "seventh jar"? Is that what's suggested here? They filled the jars. Jesus then said, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." Here's another question to ponder. Draw some out from where? From one of the six jars? That's the most natural assumption, but which one? What if he meant from the well, the seventh jar? Draw some out from the well, and take it to the chief steward.

John says that they drew a cup of wine and gave it to the chief steward. I guess he was like the caterer. He was shocked, amazed. He called to the groom and said,

Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.

In other words, "You old scoundrel, you. You saved the best for last."

The final sentence in this text is the key to understanding this story. John says,

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

This story, positioned at the beginning of the Gospel of John, is an epiphany, a revelation of who this man named Jesus was. It occurred at a wedding, but this story is not about weddings. It involved a mother and son,

but it's not about family relationships. Water was turned into wine, but it's not about water or wine. It is about Jesus, the Living Water, who brought joy to the bone-dry party called life.

No, his hour had not yet come, but it would come. His words to Mary were respectful, but let there be no mistake. His mother would not control his destiny. His Father would. His actions would be governed by an hour set by God, not his mother.

Those six empty water jars represented a religious system that was failing the people of Jesus' day. If the life of faith is supposed to bring the deeper levels of joy, meaning, and hope to one's life, then the old forms of religion were incomplete, insufficient. Perhaps they did bring joy and meaning and hope at one time, but somewhere along the way the party ran dry. It ran dry, and in this epiphany story Jesus brought new wine to the party of life.

Now, let's be very careful here. This story is not about Jesus' rejection of Judaism any more than it is about his rejection of his mother. No, it is about how Judaism, Christianity, or any religion is vulnerable to losing its heart and soul. It's about how the forms of religion, the creeds and institutions and orthodoxy, can smother out the spirit of religion. It's about getting into a religious rut and becoming so comfortable there that the party becomes bone-dry, and we lose our joy.

That day at the wedding in Cana of Galilee Jesus was saying that there is a well nearby that's deeper than any water jar, regardless of how big the jar is. There is a well nearby that has a constant supply of fresh and refreshing water. Yes, we can call it Living Water, and it quenches a very deep thirst.

This text calls us to take a close look at our own faith journey. It happens to us too. The journey begins with deep and passionate love of our Lord and becomes love of our church. Then it becomes a sense of duty, obligation. And then one day we're washing our hands and feet with "holy" water—just because that's what's expected. It's my job to tell you that there is a well nearby, a well filled with Living Water, and we are invited to drink freely. You may have been on this journey for a long, long time, so it's also my job to tell you that Jesus still saves the best for last. So let us drink deeply from the well that never runs dry.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we peer into that well. We can hear the waters moving, splashing. We can smell its freshness. We want to feel it pour over us, but this rut has become comfortable. Help us to risk a sip of new wine. Amen.