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Every Miracle Begins With A Problem John 2:1-11

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While it is not my subject today, I can't preach from the Gospel of John without briefly noting how distinct it is from the other three Gospels. In the fourth Gospel, there is no birth story as in Matthew and Luke; rather, it opens like Genesis, "In the beginning." In John, Jesus delivers no Sermon on the Mount (or Plain). He tells no parables, heals no lepers, does not instruct his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer, and does not institute the Lord's Supper on the night of his betrayal and arrest. The kinds of moral teaching and spiritual instruction associated with Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke are almost completely absent from John, as are Jesus' typically brief sayings (e.g., Mark 2:27; 12:17). John's Gospel is structured by the "I am" sayings of Jesus that reveal different facets of his identity and purpose, as well as by a number of signs that lead some people, but not all, who witness them to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Listen to John 2:1-11 and the first sign that Jesus did.

"On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and **the mother of Jesus** was there. **Jesus and his disciples** had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "*They have no wine.*" And Jesus said to her, "**Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.**" His mother said to the servants, "**Do whatever he tells you.**" Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.

Jesus said to them, "*Fill the jars with water.*" And they filled them up to the brim.

He said to them, "*Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.*"

So they took it. When **the steward** tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him,

"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."

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

The theme I want to highlight today from this passage is **Every Miracle Begins with a Problem**. The story begins **on the third day** after Jesus called Philip and Nathanael to follow him, four days after Andrew and Simon Peter began to follow Jesus. The disciples are in their very first days of being with Jesus, it is their orientation period

and they are learning about who he is. The problem in the story occurs at a wedding attended by the mother of Jesus as well as Jesus and his new disciples. In John's Gospel, the mother of Jesus is present only twice - at Cana and at the cross (2:1-5 and 19:25-27), she is present at the first of his signs and at the culmination of his work. **In John we never learn her name.** She is only referred to as, "**the mother of Jesus**" and the first time we see her is at a wedding in Cana, a small village nine miles northwest of Nazareth. The wedding at Cana took place on the third day, so would the resurrection of Jesus.

A wedding celebration was a week long event of eating and drinking, dancing and visiting, and in the hospitality tradition of the Middle East, it would be seen as a great embarrassment, even humiliating to run out of wine at one of the most important moments in a family's life, unfortunately that is what happens – the wine gives out. The mother of Jesus relates what she observed: "*They have no wine (2:3).*" The implication is that she wants Jesus to do something about it.

Jesus responds by calling her "*woman*" (2:4a), a term that could be used for other women without disrespect, but not one that a son would use for his mother. Jesus uses the same term when he speaks to the Samaritan woman (John 4:21) and Mary Magdalene (John 20:13). Jesus says, "**Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? Or "What have you to do with me?"**" This phrase or a slight variation of it, occurs a number of times in the Bible (see Judges 11:12; 1 Kings 17:18; 2 Kings 3:13; 2 Chronicles 35:21; Mark 1:24; 5:7). The phrase is used to establish distance between the person speaking and the one being spoken to, and often with a tone of warning or agitation. We might paraphrase it by saying something, like, "*Woman, that's not my problem. Do I look like the caterer?"*" Jesus seems at least a little irritated by his mother's comment, "*They have no wine,*" which implies that he should do something about it.

Jesus says, "**My hour has not yet come.**" It isn't yet time for Jesus to fully reveal who he is, that was determined by God and not by Mary's desire or anyone else's need or situation. As John's gospel unfolds we learn that Jesus' "hour" is the hour of his passion (John 7:30; 8:20). This unusual exchange between Jesus and his mother has to be understood not on the level of a typical mother and son conversation but in light of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Undeterred by Jesus' reply, **believing he can help when there is problem**, his mother turns to the servants and says, "**Do whatever he tells you.**"

This is good advice and it is meant not just for the servants but for all who would follow Jesus. **Jesus' mother has confidence and trust in Jesus and that is the beginning of faith.** She says, "*Do whatever he tells you,*" - act in obedience and faith to what Jesus tells you to do. Sometimes this is first step toward God acting in our life. If the servants had not listened to Jesus, if they had been disobedient, if they had ignored his instructions, then there would have been no miracle, no water into wine, no blessing for bride and groom, and family and guests, no sign for the disciples to help them believe in Jesus. **Doing what Jesus tells us to do is, for John, the essence of discipleship and the best way for us to live if we are seeking life in all its fullness.** "Do whatever he tells you," is not just a mother's instruction to a servant at a wedding – it is a motto for Christian living.

George MacDonald (in *Creation in Christ*) wrote about discipleship and doing what Jesus tells us to do. **"Get up, and do something the Master tells you;** so make yourself a disciple at once. Instead of asking whether you believe or not, ask yourself whether you have this day **done one thing because he said, Do it,** or once abstained because he said, Do not do it. It is simply absurd to say you believe, or even want to believe in him, if you do not do anything he tells you. If you can think of nothing he ever said as having had an atom of influence on your doing and not doing, you have too good ground to consider yourself no disciple of his.

But you can begin at once to *be* a disciple of the Living One – **by obeying him in the first thing you can think of in which you are not obeying him.** We must learn to obey him in everything, and so we must begin somewhere. Let it be at once, and in the very thing that lies at the door of our conscience!"

Miracles can happen when people begin doing what Jesus tells them to do. When we need to forgive someone or to receive someone's forgiveness – do what he tells you to do. When it comes to serving the poor and under resourced, do what he tells you to do. On Wednesday evening Jill and I were very touched to be able to represent BBC at the Lower Cape Outreach Council's Annual Meeting and Dinner. Lower Cape presented BBC with their 2007 Hope Award for all the financial and volunteer support that BBC folks give through many of Lower Cape's programs as well as for the renovations that BBC did of their facilities.

I believe this is what we are trying to do in sponsoring homes for Habitat for Humanity. There is a problem – a lack of affordable housing, and God can work through us to do what will be for the families a miracle in providing a safe, healthy home. I hope

we will all be able to give as the Lord has blessed us on May 13 when we received our special offering so we can sponsor the home here in Brewster as well as one in Haiti and do work on the church parsonage as well. It seems like a big challenge to raise \$80,000 but

when we have a problem or a need in our life, like the mother of Jesus, we must continue to trust in Jesus' ability to act.

The story continues with our being told there were six stone jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each capable of holding 20-30 gallons. Stone jars, in contrast to earthen ware, were free from the possibility of impurity. The Jewish rites of purification – perhaps referring to the ritual cleansing of hands at meals – were a very forward thinking, medically sound ritual. The new wine of Jesus is created in the “old” vessels of Jewish purification rites. The old forms are given new content. The empty jars stood waiting to be filled, in the same way the story encourages us to reflect **how are we like empty vessels waiting to be filled by the new wine of Jesus?**

If there is such a thing as a formula for miracles – it seems they all begin with a problem. **Then you start with what you have** - they at least had containers and water. They needed wine. In the midst of an ordinary family's celebration – the hidden glory of Jesus God's Son is revealed unexpectedly. We also should look for the hidden glory of Jesus in the midst of our ordinary life. Jesus turned an astonishing amount of water into wine, 120-180 gallons - for a small wedding in a village.

At the start of the fourth gospel, John begins to paint a rich portrait of who Jesus is – that portrait has to do with producing a picture that will be completed at the appointed “hour.” This is just the first of many signs that reveal the glory of Jesus, that enable us to see who Jesus truly is, so we might believe in him. In a strange sort of way, Jesus in the fourth Gospel is kind of like Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne, or Peter Parker. Those ordinary names aren't as well known as Superman, Bat Man, and Spiderman. Those superheroes lead ordinary lives on the one hand, people know them as the fastest typing reporter for the Daily Planet, a rich philanthropist, and a photographer, but they are much more. They all perform signs that reveal a glimpse of their true identity and power to those who are able to see and believe. The difference between those superheroes of comic books and movies and Jesus is that Jesus actually lived and walked on the earth and did incredible things.

Every miracle Jesus performs in John and in every other gospel begins with a problem – there is family embarrassed that has run out of wine at a wedding reception,

there is hungry crowd of 5,000 people and there is not enough food, someone is ill or even dead, someone is possessed by a demon. Every miracle begins with a problem. When we have a problem, this is a good thing to remember. We're in a better situation to experience a miracle. Problems can evoke a miracle. They can also reveal to us the presence, power, and new life that Jesus can bring into the midst of the most difficult or challenging circumstances or even in the regular course of our life.

The story concludes by showing us two different ways of responding to Jesus – the steward and the disciples. The steward in the story is perplexed by the sudden abundant appearance of such high quality wine. He summons the bridegroom, the host of the party, because he assumes the wine can be explained by some conventional reason, like unprecedented hospitality or breaking with tradition. **Jesus' disciples** see in the miraculous abundance of good wine a sign of God's presence and glory among them. The steward tried to reshape the miracle to fit his former categories of belief. The disciples allowed their categories to be reshaped by Jesus' miracle and so they believe in Jesus as the revealer of God. There is no story of the transfiguration of Jesus in John's gospel, because God's glory is continually manifested in Jesus' life and ministry.

While the key in the Cana wedding story is that this was the first sign of Jesus that revealed his glory and helped his disciples believe in him - I wonder about a totally untold part of the story that perhaps didn't interest John at all. **What happened to the bride and groom?** We're never even told their names. What a story they had to tell as the years passed! I trust they lived together for many years, never forgetting how they had glimpsed Jesus' true identity as early as his closest and most respected disciples through the miracle he performed at their wedding.

Since Jesus was wildly extravagant in providing around 150 gallons of wine, it is reasonable to assume that there was some wine leftover and hopefully if the couple went away for a brief honeymoon, a family member or friend poured the leftover wine into smaller containers to preserve it for the happy couple. Throughout the joys and heartaches of decades of married life – the birth of several children, likely the loss of a child, significant holidays, feasts, and anniversaries, the birth of their grandchildren – I can imagine the couple taking out and using some of the great wine that Jesus had made for them.

In their old age and the twilight of their years, sitting by the fire some night, they eventually come to the end of the rabbi's wine. They slowly drink and savor the wine

Jesus made and reminisce and tell stories of their life together. As they finish the final drops, he says, *“That’s it,”* in a voice both satisfied and sad. *“All gone. None to pass on to the children and grandchildren now. Just the story of our wedding at Cana, and how Jesus blessed us abundantly, extravagantly with wine, how he turned our problem into a miracle.”* All that was left was the story.

All that is left is the story of God’s presence and power in their midst and how Jesus glory is revealed in the presence of wine that saved a wedding celebration and marked the coming of a new age. Faith is the capacity to view experience from a particular perspective, it is not absolute certainty or it wouldn’t be faith. To have faith is to be open to God’s revelation in history, in our lives, even in our problems. Faith is a continuous process of reassessment and growth. Perhaps the wife responded to her husband, *“Not to worry, as long as people come to Jesus’ table, there will be more wine.”*

The disciples believed in Jesus. What will we think about Jesus? How will we respond to him? Will we do whatever he tells us to do? Does his presence with us bring newness of life and hope that we can start with what we have, even in the midst of our heartache or trouble, and know that God can grace us with hope and new life. Do we believe that God can work miracles even in the midst of problems? Throughout the fourth gospel, John presents signs that reveal who Jesus is, while also hoping we will progress spiritually from having an openness to faith, to a faith based on signs, to a mature faith that no longer needs continual exposure to signs. As Jesus says to Thomas in John 20:29, *“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”*

The story invites us to see what the disciples see, that in the abundance and graciousness of Jesus’ gift, one catches a glimpse of the identity and character of God. *“From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace”* (John 1:16).

Prayer – Jesus can take our emptiness and fill it and transform it. When we’re empty, help us turn to Jesus. May we do whatever he tells us, so that he can use us to fill the emptiness of others.

Litany

Jesus in John's Gospel

One: The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared,

All: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" John 1:29

One: "Jesus said to them, I am the bread of life.

All: Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." John 6:35

One: Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world.

All: Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.

As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." John 8:12, 9:5

One: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved. I am the good shepherd.

All: The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." John 10:9, 11.

One: Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life.

All: Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

One: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." John 12:32

All: "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6