

What Happens in Cana...

In the bustling heart of a Pennsylvania city, a Presbyterian Church stood not only as a monument to faith but also as a stage for the unexpected. This grand church, with its iconic red brick and towering steeple, was filled to the brim with guests, drawn to what was expected to be a joyous union of two well-loved individuals.

My grandfather, a pastor with years of experience, presided over the ceremony. His voice, rich with gravitas, filled the large, echoing space as he reached the traditional moment of asking if there were any objections to the marriage.

"Speak now or forever hold your peace," he said, expecting the usual silent affirmation.

Instead, the bride herself declared, "I do."

The tenor of the room shifted from soft whispers to stunned silence. She directed everyone to look under their seats. Each guest found an envelope taped to the underside of their pew, containing a photograph that caused the pregnant pause of silence to turn into a chorus of audible gasps. The photograph revealed the groom in an intimate moment with one of the bridesmaids.

The revelation hung heavy in the air, thick with the scent of betrayal and shock. Under the grand stained-glass windows that had witnessed countless vows of eternal love, my grandfather closed his binder, his expression one of calm in the storm of emotions. The bride, meanwhile, stood resolutely at the altar.

With grace and dignity, she walked down the aisle, her solitary figure a poignant symbol of strength and liberation. No vows were exchanged, only profound truths unveiled. My grandfather, in his many years of service, had presided over numerous weddings, but this day was marked by the unexpected—a stark reminder that life often takes unforeseen paths – things do not always go as planned.

Have you ever been to a wedding that didn't go as planned? This morning we read about the wedding at Cana.

Cana was a small blip on the geographic radar. It was a town of little to no significance, but there we find Jesus at a wedding party, *and* there's a problem.

Back in antiquity, couples didn't go on honeymoons. Rather, they would have a seven-day party furnished by the family of the groom. This was a standard and expected event.

Remember that we're talking about folks who aren't well off in any sense of the word. These folk would scrimp and save for these parties - they wanted them to be flawless – because why wouldn't they?

So, the fact that this wedding party ran out of wine was no small thing. In a world where we can scoot off to the supermarket and replenish items at a moment's notice, this might seem like a minor inconvenience. But, make no mistake, this party was running on fumes.

The story is simple, and it's likely the best-known miracle in John's Gospel.

In its simplest form, the story goes like this: There's a wedding, they run out of wine, Jesus turns water into wine, and the party goes on.

Unfortunately, the simple version of the story isn't the whole story. In fact, this passage can lead us to some pretty troubling questions. But let's put a pin in that for a moment.

Fun fact, in the Gospel of John, Mary's name is never used. She is always referred to as "the mother of Jesus." Put that in your back pocket for trivia night.

I mention Mary because it is she and not Jesus who makes the initial observation that the wine has run out. She snaps into action and lets Jesus know what's going on. It's odd, Jesus could seem to care less in so many words he says, "That's not my problem." If you want to know what the text says - it says, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

As modern listeners those words strike us as rather rude, and even repugnant. Yet the author of John is up to something in this instance. All throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus is without a doubt, divine. There is no question.

From the very first verse of the very first chapter, the author of John makes it clear that Jesus is in fact, God. When the author uses language like "Woman" and "Of what concern is that to me", the author is drawing a boundary between this world and the next. It's an acknowledgment that Jesus takes his cue from God the Father, and God the Father alone.

But even though this may be the case, Jesus never wastes the opportunity to teach, and he does so by performing a miracle. Or to use John's terminology - Jesus performs a Sign.

So, to complete this sign, Mary commands the servants to do whatever Jesus asks. So, Jesus asks the servants to go fill up the jars with water. In case you were wondering, we're talking anywhere between 120-180 gallons of water - it's a lot of wine.

Crazier still - it's not like they filled the jars up halfway or even three quarters. Scripture says that the servants filled the jars to the brim. And then what comes next is the most miraculous thing of all. The plain water turns into wine.

In so many words, Jesus saves the day and reveals the extravagant love and power of God. But there's a little bit more to it than that. This sign is more than Jesus saving the day; this sign reveals not only who Jesus is but why Jesus has come. But before we get into that let's swing back to a comment I made earlier about how this passage can be troublesome.

This passage can be troublesome.

It can be troublesome because it is Jesus' mother and not Jesus himself who sees the lack of wine. Shouldn't Jesus have known?! That's kind of odd.

It's Jesus' mother who tugs on his robe and says, "Hey, honey I need you to do something!" And then Jesus' response of "What concern is that to me"? That can hit our ears in an odd way.

In the world that we all live in, we're not worried about running out of anything - we're not. We can go to the store anytime we want and get whatever we want. But, this is not a universal reality, especially for folks living on the margins of society – and not simply in antiquity, *today*.

The reason that this can be troubling is that at first blush Jesus doesn't seem to care, of what concern is that to me? Why didn't Jesus seem to care - or put another way - why did the author of John's Gospel portray Jesus in such light?

If the wedding at Cana is about God's extravagant love, we must then come to terms with our broken world. We must come to terms with the stark realities of hunger, homelessness, abuse, human trafficking, and ask, "Where is God?"

In reference to this passage, one theologian says that "It may seem like a travesty to turn in a narrative about divine [extravagance] into a trial of God, and yet it is passages like this one about divine extravagance that make God's absence in the face of poverty, suffering, and evil stand out." And frankly, it does.

I would counter that theologian's observation, by not disputing that those things exist, but instead, to shift the focus. It can be all too easy to put God on trial for human failure. Not, one of us doubts that God can intervene in history - I mean that's what Christmas Eve is all about. Not one of us would doubt that God in a snap the finger could eradicate the ills of our world.

This may sound odd, but I'm not sure that's a God I want. Hear me out. It's not that I don't want these ills to vanish, no one wants homelessness and hunger. The issue I find with placing all the onus on God is - why then am I here? Why then are we here?

If you recall, it was Mary's actions that brought attention to a need. Similarly, we are tasked with bringing things to God's attention, not because God doesn't already know, but because God wants us to take notice. It's not that God doesn't care; it is to say that God has placed us here for reason.

What this means is that we don't supplement action for the ever-so-popular yet platitudinal *thoughts and prayers*. Instead, we do something.

Talk to others about hunger. Talk to others about homelessness. Advocate. Give to a charity. We are called to be God's hands and feet in the world, and these are but a few ways. Remember, Jesus healed one person at a time - our actions don't have to be large - but they need to be faith-driven; trusting that God can and will work through you.

At a certain level that's what Mary is modeling for us in this passage. Yes, God can do wonderful and amazing things, but God also put humans in the world to love each other. It's that whole loving God and loving neighbor thing. That's how we heal.

It's all too easy to place the blame on God because what that does is it passes the buck. And I'm not saying this to guilt, anyone, by no means this is not about placing blame, it is about shedding light. Mary shed light, and as Christians, as people who believe in this God of signs and miracles

and extravagance, we too are called to act in kind. Our calling is to shed light in the dark places and to be God's hands and feet in the world.

So, let's bring it back to the miracle, the sign.

If you recall Jesus asked the servants to fill the jars to the brim. In effect that action, the way in which Jesus transformed the water into wine is the way in which our baptisms have affected us.

Last week we explored our baptisms some - in our baptisms - we didn't experience a physical change, but we became altogether different. God showered us in the type of love that is filled to the brim. And when you start thinking about the type of love that God has for us, I am compelled to ask how that love and extravagance shows up in my life.

What this does is it causes us to say - "Lord, send me" instead of "God, why don't you do something." That's an important distinction.

The wedding at Cana is a fascinating miracle, but it's about so much more than Jesus saving a party. This sign is a reminder to us that we should be partying as well. We should be celebrating every day that God gives us, knowing that God's love never runs out. And I'm not endorsing drunkenness or debauchery - no, no. What I am endorsing is a type of celebration that causes us to stand in constant awe of our maker.

Friends, what happened in Cana shouldn't stay in Cana – it is meant for the world. This day know that God has filled you to the brim with love and grace. Know that you are God's hands and feet in this world and that when you take faith-filled actions on behalf of others God takes delight in them.

-Amen