

Second Sunday after Epiphany  
Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 36:5-10, John 2:1-11  
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On the surface of today's gospel lesson is the story of a wedding. Weddings are still joyous events especially when the bride and groom are obviously deliriously in love with one another.

I co-officiated in a wedding recently in Richmond. Minutes before the ceremony was to begin, the groom told me that the hardest thing for him was not being able to see his bride-to-be all that day. He did say they had talked on the phone several times, however, and that had helped. He couldn't wait to get the wedding started so he could finally see his beloved. I was very touched.

I have been fortunate to have been a part of weddings with few glitches over the years. I attended a wedding a few years ago in which the wedding party had to stand for a rather lengthy message from the clergyman. About 2/3 of the way through it, a bridesmaid collapsed to the floor. The priest looked over the pulpit at the fallen, and when he saw that the young woman was being assisted, continued right where he left off for at least another 10 minutes. That wedding will always be remembered for the priest who didn't know when to stop.

The wedding in Cana of Galilee could have been remembered as the one in which the wine ran out. Unlike today, Jewish weddings in Jesus' time could last as long as a week with different guests arriving each day. In a time and place when people lived on very little, a wedding was an occasion to forget for the moment how poor everyone was and feast with lots of food and wine and gaiety.

I read that wine was the centerpiece of a first century Jewish wedding. One rabbi is even quoted as saying, "Without wine, there is no joy!" Neither the young couple nor their families wanted their special wedding celebration to be without wine and certainly joy.

On a very human level, then, what Mary and Jesus do is to save the couple and their families from a disastrously embarrassing and shameful situation. Mary obviously was a caring and compassionate person who knew her son to be the same. She was able to walk away in complete trust that Jesus would find a way to solve the problem of the diminishing wine supply.

This brings us to an important lesson. Can we hand over a problem we are having to Jesus and let him solve it in his own way? A member at our Bible study class commented, "If I give a situation to Jesus in prayer, I usually take it back to solve on my own." This person speaks for many of us, I suspect.

Jesus may very well want us to be part of the solution, but we nearly always need his guidance as to just how we can help. Mary, in this case, fully trusted, and she was not disappointed.

One of the unique features of John's gospel is that every saying and certainly every story has multiple layers of meaning. John also uses some special language that sometimes needs to be decoded.

For example, in the exchange between Jesus and his mother, Jesus seems to be writing his mother and her request off. He says to her, "Woman, what concern is that to me? My hour has not yet come." The use of the term "woman" is not disrespectful, but it is not intimate like "Mom" would have been. Jesus is clearly trying to distance himself from any involvement in the wine shortage, at least initially. Jesus' reference to his "hour" here is one of those words that requires decoding.

Jesus' hour is the point at which he will fully reveal his divinity and purpose for coming to earth. When he is crucified, resurrected and raised, everyone will see God's glory on full display. Here as a wedding guest, Jesus isn't at all sure he should launch his ministry of revealing God, the Father, to the world.

John calls this a "sign" – the first of seven in this gospel. The last will be the raising of Lazarus from four days dead and buried.

How does John further use this wedding saving event to launch Jesus' public ministry? What are some of the other subtle layers buried deep in this story?

Six stone jars for purification are significant. Seven is a perfect number for the Jews. Six is imperfect or incomplete. The Jewish people practiced purification rituals, such as hand washing, not as a means of hygiene but as a way to fulfill the Jewish Law. The six purification jars may signal the imperfection or inability of the Jewish Law to secure a grace-filled relationship with God.

Furthermore, in those jars, ordinary water is transformed into the best wine by Jesus. Does Jesus want to transform our lives from being mere ordinary people to people who in the words of today's Collect are "...illuminated by your Word and Sacraments," so we "...may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, that he may be known, worshipped and obeyed to the ends of the earth;"

Then, just think about the importance of wine for us as Christians. It is part of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist or Holy Communion that communicates to us the very presence of Jesus in our lives. In the gospel, the wine Jesus provides is the really good stuff, on this occasion, uncharacteristically served late in the festivities. God has saved the best for last. Late in the

history of God's people, the Lord is doing a new and unexpected thing – sending his very own son to us, the best he has.

There is also the matter of the quantity of good wine produced, as much as 120 – 180 gallons. This is way more than could be used in weddings for years to come. The overabundance of wine would remind Jewish readers of Hebrew Scripture references to that time when God would come at the end of the age to bring the Kingdom of peace and justice without suffering, war, barrenness, hunger or scarcity of any kind. Our Psalm today alludes to this time when we hear in verse 8, "They feast upon the abundance of your house; you give them drink from the river of your delights."

For us, whenever Jesus is among us, we lack for nothing. When we are together on Sunday morning, or during a potluck supper, in Bible study, at a men's breakfast or doing outreach together, have you noticed that your worries and fears evaporate? We experience an abundance of Spirit and Christ in one another.

Jesus saves a wedding and he saves all our lives by being the new wine that can and does transform our lives from despair, anger, guilt and fear to faith, hope, peace and love. Turning water into wine is some miracle for sure, but no less than the miracle each one of us has become through the power of God in this community of the faithful. We may take our marriages for granted, but it is no small matter when two people choose to make each other their top priority.

Ever since our recent sabbatical trip to Israel last October, when Juanita and I walked from Nazareth to Cana of Galilee, this story in John has taken on far more importance for us. In a Franciscan church there, we renewed our wedding vows in front of the altar with tears of joy and gratitude that God had given us both a second chance at love and marriage. Afterwards, we celebrated with a bottle of Cana wedding wine we bought nearby.

I hope we can all say at one time or another that we, too, have tasted and savored the new wine that Jesus always wants to give us. And we have felt abundantly blessed. AMEN.