

Sermon for Second Sunday after Epiphany

R. Susan Smandych

Today we find ourselves at the second Sunday after **Epiphany**. You may recall that during Epiphany each year, the Gospel readings focus on stories about the **beginning of Jesus' ministry**. In today's Gospel from John, we find Mary, Jesus and the disciples at a **wedding in Cana**, an event which is only recorded within this Gospel.

The structure of today's reading is typical of miracles in the Gospels: first, the **setting** is established; then a **need** arises; next, Jesus performs a **miracle** to address that need; finally, there is a **response** to that miracle.

The **setting** is a wedding in Cana (a few kilometers northeast of Jesus' home town of Nazareth) in the first century. Now weddings at that time were incredibly important in Jewish culture, and always accompanied by large and elaborate celebratory feasts. According to custom, such celebrations normally lasted up to seven days, and depending on the wealth of the family, sometime entire towns could be invited. *(Presumably, the idea of social distancing, and restrictions on the size of public gatherings, were not considerations back then!).*

The **need** that arises is a lack of wine. Now this might not seem like a big deal to us in today's society, since someone could just pop over to the nearest liquor mart to pick more up, but in Biblical times, to run out of wine during a wedding celebration would lead to a loss of family honor and status, and since rabbis believed wine to be a symbol of joy, to run out of wine would have implied that neither the guests nor bride and groom were happy. So this wasn't just a need, but a real *crisis*! Mary notices this crisis, and implicitly calls upon Jesus to do something. He dismisses her concern, and distances himself from the crisis; he's like, '...not my problem'.

But despite Jesus initially distancing Himself from the crisis, he then does something to address the need for wine - well, *actually*, Jesus doesn't *do* anything, but he *says* two things: Jesus tells the servants to fill six stone jars with water (about 150 gallons' worth), and Jesus tells the servants to bring a sample to the chief steward. And that is when the **miracle** occurs: Jesus not only addresses the need for wine, but does so in *abundance*, and with *goodness*; essentially, a whole lot of water becomes a whole lot of wine, and very good wine at that! And in performing this miracle, Jesus *conducted* his first public act, *began* His ministry, and *revealed* His glory.

And what was the **response** to Jesus' miracle of abundance and goodness? Jesus' disciples *believed* in Him.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' miracles are '*signs*' that essentially *reveal* the salvation and new life present in the world through Jesus – and the response to such revelation is belief, in this instance, by the disciples.

Now what I have always found intriguing about this first miracle is how *understated* it is. Some would argue that it is not nearly as exciting or compelling as the *other* six miracles presented in the Gospel of John, which are the healing of the nobleman's son (4:46-54); healing at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-15); feeding of the 5,000 (6:1-14); Jesus walking on water (6:15-21); healing of the blind man (9:1-12); and the raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44). There is also very little detail provided about the miracle itself in today's reading. John does not tell us *how* Jesus transforms the water into wine, or precisely *when* the water becomes wine, and it seems that not many people actually *witnessed* the miracle. Even the chief steward and bridegroom do not seem to know what had happened; the chief steward just assumes the bridegroom saved the best for the last.

But by referring to Jesus' miracles as signs, John's Gospel shifts attention away from the miracle to point *beyond* the miracle, to *who* is behind the miracle – basically, it is not about *what* Jesus does or says, but *who* He is, and *how and when* His purpose will be fulfilled. So what *is* John implicitly saying *about* Jesus through the story of the wedding at Cana? I would suggest that John is trying to highlight three things:

1. **John is saying that Jesus is inherently connected to God the Father** – When Mary implied that Jesus should do something about the lack of wine, he essentially ignored her and said "I won't do it. It's not time" – but then Jesus took action anyway. So what prompted Jesus to address the need for wine? Within the theology of John's Gospel, no human being, not even His own mother, could determine Jesus' 'hour' or convince Him to take action. God the Father, through His intimate, inherent relationship with Jesus, determines when and how Jesus' 'hour' becomes a reality in the world i.e., Jesus' actions reflect God's will, and God's will alone.
2. **John is saying that Jesus is the Messiah** – The miracle of turning water into wine is not some kind of a cool 'party trick', but prophetically significant. In the Old Testament, Jeremiah foretold that in the Messianic age "they will rejoice in the bounty of the LORD in the grain, the new wine" (31:12), and Isaiah used wedding imagery to symbolize the Messianic age (54:4-8). The setting of a wedding and Jesus' association with wine in today's reading both imply the Messianic age has arrived, and thus presumably that the Messiah is Jesus.

3. **John is saying that Jesus is the source of abundance and goodness, both now, and in the time to come** – The story of the wedding at Cana is rich with symbolic importance. Wine is symbolic of divine presence in the world, and although the amount of wine Jesus ‘produces’ in this story may seem like an exaggeration to us, it reflects the fullness we have all received in Christ in our lives. The good news is that Jesus has already appeared, bringing with Him God’s goodness and grace, and that through Jesus, we will have eternal life.

Let us pray. Thank you, God for the story of the wedding at Cana and the insight it provides.

Through this and other signs in John’s Gospel may we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,
and that through believing, we may have life in His name. **Amen.**