

## **“Grace is Never Stingy”**

### **John 2:1-11**

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Who would have thought that one of the hottest news items last week would focus upon NBC's late night television schedule? I suspect some of the executives at NBC are wishing for the good ole days when Johnny Carson hosted the top rated Tonight show.

One thing that made Johnny such a good host was his interviews with ordinary people. Once he interviewed an eight-year-old boy that rescued two playmates from a mine shaft in West Virginia. When Johnny discovered that the young man attended church regularly, he asked, “What are you learning in Sunday school?”

“Last week,” the little boy replied, “our lesson was about Jesus going to a wedding and turning water into wine.” Carson continued, “What did you learn from that story?” The boy squirmed in his chair. It was apparent that he had not thought about this. Then he lifted his face and said, “**If you are going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!**” The crowd roared with laughter.

Jesus and his disciples were invited to a wedding in the little peasant village of Cana, nine miles north of Nazareth. It was a good thing they were, because Jesus responded to a crisis that would have ended the wedding celebration and humiliated the wedding couple. Let me share the details.

Sometime after Jesus arrived at the wedding feast in Cana, the wine ran out. This may sound like a small problem to us, but it was not to this wedding party. Jews attached great importance to the high moments of life. A wedding was not just a brief ceremony enjoyed by a couple of families, but a joyous event shared by the entire community. Weddings offered a bright interlude into an otherwise dreary existence.

This is why typical wedding celebrations lasted for seven days. The couple was treated like royalty during that period, as guests would come and go to rejoice with them.

A week-long celebration also allowed people to travel from far away to meet the couple. This made it possible, in turn, for the couple to be among friends who would give them lodging when they traveled.

At some point in this particular celebration, the wine ran out. Jesus' mother, whom John never mentions by name in his gospel, took the initiative to inform Jesus of the problem, clearly expecting him to do something. Perhaps she was merely approaching him like any mother would an adult son, hoping he would get more wine from neighbors or a merchant. Whatever her intention, Jesus was faced with a tough decision.

Was it time for him to begin his ministry by performing his first miracle, or sign, as John preferred to call it? Had the time arrived for him to lay out a new vision for the Kingdom of God, one more inclusive, compassionate and righteous than the Pharisees portrayed? Was it time for him to confront the religious leaders, speaking truth to power? Evidently, Jesus came to that conclusion and chose to rescue this couple from hurt and shame.

You know the rest of the story, I'm sure. Jesus told the servants to fill up the six large water pots sitting nearby. He then instructed them to draw some out and take it to the head waiter. When the chief steward tasted the water turned to wine he was astonished at its quality. To his surprise, it was the best that he had tasted during the entire celebration, and told the groom so.

Do you know what intrigues me most about this story this morning? It is John's placement of it in his gospel. He used it to introduce his readers to Jesus. He doesn't begin like Matthew and Luke by describing his birth or telling us about his lineage. Instead, he pulls a story out of his past and describes it.

**Why did John do this?** It appears that he was eager to explain what Jesus meant in 1:50 when he told Nathanael that he would see “greater things.”

Perhaps John also felt that what a person does reveals more about that individual than what he or she says. If we accept this assumption, what does this story tell John's readers, including us, about Jesus? For me, it is this; that he was a **good neighbor, compassionate, humble, and generous**.

Weddings were important in that culture, as they are in ours. While they were festive occasions, which the peasants needed, they also served to let a young couple know they were not alone, but a part of a loving community that would encourage and support them. Attending the wedding festivities was a way of expressing that support.

Jesus knew this and took some of his disciples with him to the wedding. Even with all they had on their minds and the heavy challenges they were facing, they were **good neighbors**. I'm not surprised. The Word that became flesh really did walk among them, engaged and involved in their lives.

This story also reveals Jesus' heart, which was filled with **compassion** for his neighbors. You recall that Jesus appeared to struggle when Mary told him about the couple running out of wine, implying that he should do something. "Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come," Jesus said.

I know this sounds harsh and insensitive, but this kind of response by Jesus was not that uncommon in John's gospel. Jesus was never coerced into doing anything, and on other occasions later did something that he had earlier refused to do, as was the case here. The next thing we hear, Jesus is giving the servants instructions that would solve the problem.

What made the difference? Why did he decide to respond? What was the tipping point? I believe it was his compassion. He came to make hope visible. What better place and time to start?

I certainly see his **humility** in this story. At all times, he is in the background. Even the steward did not know where this new wine came from. Jesus was content to let the bridegroom receive the credit.

He could have gotten a lot of mileage out of this miracle and his fame would have spread like wildfire in the opening days of his ministry. It would have been hard to choreograph this kind of event and the publicity that would have resulted. Surely, he would take advantage of it. He did, by staying in the background!

There is no way to read this story and overlook his **generosity**, either. Dr. Alan Culpepper points out that for the first time in this gospel, the Evangelist provides numerous details: the number of jars and their composition, purpose and size. Even the space John devotes to describing the jars is excessive, as if to emphasize the extravagance of the miracle about to take place.

The amount of wine produced was between 120 and 180 gallons. These six water pots, used for ceremonial cleansing, held between 20 and 30 gallons apiece.

Again, I am not surprised. Grace is not stingy. It never calculates to see how little can be done to satisfy expectations. It always exceeds expectations and causes cups to "run over," as the Psalmist described.

**What do you think John's message was for his readers?** Could he have used this story to show them how they can be the presence of Christ in their community? I think so. They might not have been able to turn water into wine, but they could be good neighbors, compassionate, humble and generous, and so can we. With God's help, we can see that "our hour has come" and our time has arrived to be like Jesus.

May I leave you with a final question? **If someone was going to introduce you with a story from your past, what would it be?** What would it reveal? You still have the pencil in your hand and time to write that story this week.