

“Are You Running on Empty?”

John 2:1-11

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Years ago Johnny Carson was the host of the Tonight Show and 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 host. 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 to be 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 celebrate with them.

At some point in this particular celebration, the wine ran out. Mary, Jesus’ mother, took the initiative to inform Jesus, clearly expecting him to do something about this problem. 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?

Evidently it was and I am not surprised. In John’s gospel, a crisis facing a common, peasant family was the catalyst that kicked off his public ministry. This speaks volumes about who Jesus was and what he came to do. He came to walk in our shoes and serve rather than be served. He came to help us understand God’s love and concern for us. He came to build bridges between people, not barriers. In short, he came to make the world better for all people. Could this be the reason John used this story to introduce his readers to this holy man?

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.

There are many lessons to be gleaned from this introductory story. I am tempted to approach this story from a rather unusual angle and talk about how we are experts at turning wine into water. Jesus turned the ordinary into the extraordinary, but we do just the opposite. Far too often, we turn wine into water.

It doesn’t take long for exciting marriages to go stale, parenting to become a burden, school to become boring and a new job to become dull. We are far too efficient and predictable at turning the special into the ordinary, draining joy and excitement out of every relationship, responsibility, opportunity, event or privilege. I’ll develop this idea more fully at another time, though.

This morning, the most important lesson for me comes in the form of a question. **What are you running out of that you need the most?**

In ancient cultures, an abundant supply of wine was an important element in a wedding celebration. Providing hospitality was a sacred duty. Charges could be brought against a family that ran out of wine at a wedding.

Beyond this, though, running out of wine would have indicated difficult financial days ahead for this couple. If they ran out of wine at their wedding, they would run out of other resources, along with hopes and dreams in the days ahead. There were few things needed more than wine during their wedding celebration and they were running short.

What are you running out of that you need the most? Is it hope? Perhaps it is patience. Maybe it is strength, courage, confidence, self-esteem, willpower, discipline, direction or determination. Is it a reason to keep on keeping on? Could it be ideas, inspiration or options? Is it resources needed for living and taking care of your family? What are you running out of that you need the most?

Who knows you are running short? I wonder if the guests at the celebration knew the wine supply was exhausted. If not, they soon would and that would make everyone uncomfortable.

Have you kept your needs to yourself and suffered in silence? Are you hoping against hope that something will change before everyone knows? Wonder how long it will be before word gets out?

What can you do when you are in this situation? Take a lead from Mary. Reach out for help. Inform others of your plight and allow them to travel with you down a frightening road. Don't suffer in silence when help is available.

Problem-solving usually involves others. In this situation, it involved Mary, Jesus, the servants and the chief steward. Everyone had a role to play and accepted responsibility. Working together, they avoided an embarrassing situation.

To whom do you need to reach out today? What difference would it make if you identified your need and shared it with others instead of denying it? Are there people around you that could help you turn water into wine? Could they help you turn duty into joy, responsibilities into privileges, problems into opportunities and weaknesses into strengths?

I think there are. I believe there are people that would be moved by compassion upon hearing your story.

For whom do you need to be the presence of Christ today? Who is struggling that needs grace poured on their problems? Who needs someone to walk in their shoes and speak on their behalf?

As important as Jesus is in this story, I believe Mary is the key to solving this problem. She took the initiative to inform Jesus. She gave the problem a voice and brought Jesus into the picture. She was persistent and unwilling to let this happy couple run out of wine. Had she not done this, humiliation would have flowed freely, not wine.

It must not go unnoticed that this is the last time Mary will be mentioned in the gospel of John until the crucifixion. This is her only time on stage until then. This is significant! John wants to use her, and don't overlook the fact that he was using a woman, to teach his readers, including us, a lesson. What would that be?

Our world is full of people that need us to give them hope and help. They need us to be as vocal, assertive and persistent as Mary and we must persevere even when others respond to our requests with indifference or rejection. This is what it means to be community in a broken world.

Perhaps you know someone struggling this morning because they are running low on what they need the most. Do you need to talk to God and others about their plight? Do you need to offer a word of encouragement and hope to them? Do you need to hold their hand and travel down unfamiliar roads with them? If you don't, who will? If no one does, what will happen to them?

Wasn't this the message and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birth we celebrate this weekend? Didn't he follow Mary's assertive and persistent lead by giving a voice to millions of disenfranchised citizens? I believe he did and am grateful for his leadership, courage and example.

I think John would be, too. Didn't he introduce his readers to Jesus through this story not only to reveal Jesus' identity and mission, but also to give them a role model for living in community and supporting those facing intimidating challenges and struggles.

In the prologue, John said of Jesus, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." He really meant this, didn't he? Through Jesus' first miracle, or sign as John preferred to call them, John revealed a Jesus that walks in our shoes and enters into our everyday, messy lives. Our struggles and challenges are important to him and helping us endure and overcome is his mission.

What higher mission could we have than giving others help and hope? What better role could we play than being our brother's keeper? What more could we do to advance the Kingdom of God on earth than to speak on behalf of those that are running on empty? On this weekend, especially, I can think of none.