

Hanover International Worship

January 18, 2015

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John 2: 1-11

1 On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.

2 Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples.

3 When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come."

5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

6 Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.

7 Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim.

8 And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it.

9 When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom

10 and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now."

11 This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

What is this story doing in the Bible?

It's an absurd story.

A big announcement is made: This is the first sign Jesus did.

But what a sign!

No blind or lame person to be healed.

No one in life-threatening danger to be rescued.

No disaster to be averted.

Just a plain old wedding of two people whose names we don't even know,
in a small town so insignificant that even its location is a mystery to modern
day archeologists.

And an annoying but really everyday accident – they are out of wine.

It's not even a real emergency.

A bit of better planning would have done the trick.

Does this really justify a miracle?

Really, they could have gone on celebrating without wine.

Nobody would have been seriously hurt, aside from a huge embarrassment
for the bridal couple.

Maybe some guests would even have been spared a bad hangover.

Consequently, this story has sometimes been called a "luxury miracle".

Possibly even an offensive miracle, a scandalous miracle.

Either way: an absurd story.

And an annoying story.

Jesus' mother comes up to him and whispers to him,

"They are out of wine!"

Obviously, what she means to say is, "You go and take care that they have wine! I know you can do it!"

I am sure Mary has been thinking about those words a lot that had been said over her son.

And now that she has heard him preach, she is sure of it:

He really is full of God's strength.

And we know of course that she is perfectly justified in thinking so.

But Jesus rebuffs her in a way that we can only call rude:

"Woman, what does this have to do with me?"

Why is he being so rude?

An annoying story.

An absurd story. An annoying story.

And at the same time, in a way, it's also a funny story.

Just picture that master of the feast tasting the wine and unsuspectingly asking that equally unsuspecting bridegroom,

"What are you doing here, making us serve the cheap wine first?"

Just look at your guests. They are half way drunk by now.

They wouldn't even notice if the wine got worse now.

And now that they are drunk you come up with this top notch wine?

An absurd, annoying, funny story, this first sign of Jesus.

Why?

Does he simply, as his mother whispers, want to show off what he can do?

Very unlikely.

The miracles and signs of Jesus never are ends in themselves.

No miracle just for miracle's sake.

They always are more than that. They are signs.

Signs of a new era that has begun.

The way St. John tells this story it has a clear focus:

Jesus manifested his glory

Jesus is not showing off what he can do, he is not performing a miracle for miracle's sake.

By this sign, Jesus reveals himself in all his glory!

"My hour has not yet come," Jesus says to his mother.

The audience St. John writes his gospel for immediately must have recognized these words.

"My hour" – this is how Jesus speaks of the hour of his death.

Of his being lifted up to the cross.

"My hour" – this goes far beyond this merry wedding celebration.

It hints at the reason and the focus of why Jesus came into the world.

And the story hints at even more than that.

Remember how it begins?

"On the third day..."

This story of Jesus' first sign secretly hints at Easter.

And yet more.

For St. John's audience, it was clear that a wedding is the symbol of how Jesus will celebrate with all of us on that glorious day when his kingdom is revealed.

Wine hints at Holy Communion.

A joyful meal for all those who belong to Jesus Christ, who belong to him as the long-expected Messiah.

Many times, Jesus describes God's kingdom as a great celebration, like a wonderful meal. He wants to sit at the table with all those who belong to him – in God's kingdom.

Wedding and wine – these are pictures for God's kingdom.

This is messianic vocabulary.

And we are truly talking about messianic dimensions here.

We are talking about huge amounts of wine!

Six stone jars, each holding twenty or thirty gallons,
that means about a 150 gallons of wine!

Or, for those of us who think in the metric system:

We are talking about 600 liters of wine here!

This is sheer madness. An insanely huge amount of wine.

Even if weddings in Ancient Orient did use to be celebrated for seven days.

Really, a strange kind of miracle. Jesus supplying an already half-drunk wedding party with an amount of wine they could have bathed in.

Wine in abundance.

With Jesus, there is no allocating.

No stingy passing out of shares.

But. Don't we have a whole lot of "buts" with this story?

A whole lot of objections and concerns?

We feel like we have to ask: Can we really go on telling and teaching this story?

A miracle that is certainly offensive, possibly downright scandalous. Shouldn't Jesus better have refrained from performing it in the first place?

What is he doing, giving huge amounts of alcohol to people who are already half drunk? What about the morale of this story? What about the dangers of drug abuse?

Makes me think of that faithful old church council member saying; "Oh, Pastor, the way our Lord Jesus promoted drunkenness in Cana certainly is a great tribulation!"

And how about celebrating at all:

Can we really celebrate joyfully, at the same time being aware of all the suffering in our world?

We know of all those wars going on, we read the news of people dying of the Ebola epidemic, we hear of the horrible Charlie Hebdo assassinations. And we could go on and on, recounting all the worries and troubles of the world and bringing them before God.

How can we ever celebrate lightheartedly in the face of all that?

I remember, during my course of studies in the town of Wuppertal, there was a great festivity. Our seminary had its 50th anniversary.

There was going to be a big celebration.

In the cafeteria, delicious food was waiting for us that did not bear the slightest resemblance to the food that was usually being served in that cafeteria.

Suddenly, there was some sort of disturbance near the door.

There was a small group of students who ostentatiously sat down away from the others, with no well-filled plate in front of themselves like everyone else had.

When they were asked what was going on, one student got up, her face full of reproach: How can you do this, filling your stomachs with salmon and suckling pig while people in the "Third World" are starving?

I remember, when Ms. Käßmann was installed as a bishop, she introduced something that later was referred to as a "culture of celebrating" sometimes. She began her time as a bishop with a big festivity, inviting not only the upper crust but all Christians.

Of course, this immediately alerted the critics: Think of the expenses! Shouldn't we better give this to the poor?

How about celebrating.

Can we celebrate in the face of all the worries and troubles of the world?

Jesus' first sign is rescuing a festivity with lots of wine.

God's rescue always has to do with joyfulness.

Jesus and his disciples attend an ordinary human festivity.

The Son of God, the Son of Man – not someone given to sadness, that's for sure.

Jesus was no ascetic and no prohibitionist.

(On the contrary, he was even called a glutton and a drunkard by some.)

Jesus took his disciples with him to share life and to share joy, not stingily but in its abundance.

For a long time, Christianity used to be misunderstood to be a self-denying religion, contemptuous of the body and disapproving of joy.

For a long time, people seem to have believed – or possibly still believe – God is only in charge of the needy. Which made people think of God and pray to him in times of need but not in times of joy.

For some people, this is reflected even in the way we celebrate Holy Communion. A serious and dignified ceremony it has to be, certainly, but sometimes felt to be more of a gloomy and cheerless affair, entirely forgetting that this is a messianic ceremony, a celebration of joy, and a celebration of the abundance of life Jesus wants to give us.

I remember being in church in America one Sunday.

The old pastor wanted to thank some ladies for some kind of service they had done for the congregation.

He called them up to the front and gave each of them a brightly colored jelly roll into her hands, and a kiss on the cheek.

And when he saw the surprised faces of the congregation, he said:

You know, Christians don't have to walk around with a face like they had sour pickles for breakfast!

Be joyful with those who are joyful, be sad with those who are sad, that is what St. Paul says.

And Ecclesiastes says:

To every thing there is a season,
and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

Of course, we must not lose sight of the troubles of this world.

But we may also lightheartedly celebrate and enjoy, just as Jesus did.

Sometimes, it seems that those two things meet in a special way.

We celebrated a wonderful and enjoyable worship service of "Nine Lessons and Carols" in December. And, at that same service, we were able to collect an amazing amount of money for people in need.

It is truly wonderful when our joy starts making us grateful – and aware of others.

When we have experienced the abundance of life Jesus gives us, there is no need to be stingy any more. We can share that abundance of life, and we can help and give joyfully and generously.

Jesus gives us life in abundance.

That is what St. John is telling us with this absurd, annoying, funny story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

It's no coincidence that Jesus does his first sign at a festivity, and with such a plethora of wine. It's part of his message.

"I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly", he will say later on.

Now there is one question left for us to wonder about:

How on earth did the wedding guests ever finish up all that wine?

One of the old church fathers, Jerome, simply said:

They didn't. We all are still drinking from it.

So, let us do what the disciples did: come with him and share the abundance of life he gives us.

Amen.