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“Between the Gasp and Grasp”

John 2:1-11

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¹On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

The gospel of John begins this way—

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”



“All things came into being through him, and without him, not one thing came into being.” There is a saying about the wedding in Cana—“the water recognized the face of Jesus, saw its Creator...and blushed.”

Weddings are joyful, yet they are also accidents waiting to happen. I always tell couples as we plan out their wedding ceremony that I can only guarantee one thing— Come Saturday night (or whatever date and time their wedding is planned for) you will be married. I cannot guarantee anything else; I cannot guarantee everything will be perfect, that it will not rain, or that there won't be any embarrassing moments on the dance floor. I can only guarantee that you will be married.

Because something always seems to go wrong, whether at the rehearsal dinner, at the reception, or sometime in between. There is so much planning that goes into weddings that it is inevitable some detail falls through the cracks.

Valerie and I both agreed that if it started raining the night of our wedding (which was in the middle of hurricane season), we would end the night dancing in the rain! Fortunately, it didn't rain. But the hilarity that came with my groom's cake is another story, and you can ask about that later.

Big or small, something seems to go wrong. And something went wrong at this wedding in Cana of Galilee.

Weddings in Jesus' day were very different. The bride and groom would not fly off to a tropical island beach for their honeymoon to celebrate their marriage. Instead, they would celebrate their marriage with a 7-day wedding feast at the groom's home. And it is the family that shoulders the responsibility of hospitality and provisions for the festivities. And the celebration in Cana of Galilee is in trouble because the wine is running out.

We know, however, how the story ends, how Jesus brings extravagant abundance and divine generosity “filled to the brim; how by the self-revelation of Jesus there is salvation. “Fill the jars with water... Now draw some out and take it to the chief steward.” The best wine is now served to keep the party going. The servants know what has happened, the steward is amazed, and the disciples believe in Jesus. Sounds like a happy ending! The joyous feast of the wedding celebration has been saved!

Yet there is one detail we cannot too quickly move past. The mother of Jesus (Mary is never named in John's gospel), is the one who brings the concern to Jesus and initiates the action. She is the one who notices the difficulty at hand, the depleting wine, and takes that concern to Jesus. And here is where the difficult detail comes, with Jesus' response, “What concern is that to you or me?”



We have already said that this story is about divine abundance, but did it start, as Carol Lakey Hess says, as “*the scandal of divine reluctance?* Why does God the incarnate one hold out?”¹

“What concern is that to you or me? My hour has not yet come.” Hess continues: It seems there is a plan, and everyone must be patient and wait until that plan is revealed and fulfilled. At a wedding party that is running out of wine, what can be done to keep the party going and save the bridegroom and family embarrassment and shame?

And so, we are confronted with a moment, a liminal moment, a threshold moment, a moment between what is and what will be, and it belongs to God.

When the wine runs out
The party’s just begun

But first let thirst deepen
On dry soul’s tongue and

The face of proud host whose plans
Fall short redden a shade more

Pause while the guest’s murmurs
Rise over the mundane drone

Give the knowing mother a moment
To garner the courage to ask

Let the tear fall from the cheek
Of the bride in her inconsummation

For life happens on the threshold
Between the gasp and grasp

When time stands still
And the guests become silent

¹ In her Theological Perspective essay on John 2:1-11 published in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Vol 1, Westminster Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 260.



And in the pregnant pause
The Future asks for fresh containers

To fill with new wine
Which too will run out

But leaves a taste on lips never
Again quenched by earth's fruit

Longing for the Day when
They will thirst no more.²

This poem “The Wedding” was written by Terry Chapman, and in a sermon he preached while I was at CREDO a few weeks ago, he spoke of the moment of “inconsummation,” the moment “between the gasp and grasp.” The moment between need and action, when we silence mutes the rambling thoughts of our so-called wisdom and enter into the Divine. “For life happens on the threshold.” In this between moment, in the pregnant pause, God is waiting. Here we encounter the One who was and is and will forever be, and with courage tug on the sleeves of Truth and exclaim “they have no wine.”

The mother of Jesus sees her son as someone who could—and should—meet need. And the question of *theodicy* stands beside her in this moment. Why is this not a concern for Jesus?

We see a world in desperate need, and we too turn to Jesus, as someone who could—and should—meet need. And the question of theodicy stands beside us today, as well.

In a world that is growing sadder and meaner, nearing the last drop in the jars of joy and celebration, we believe in one who claimed to bring abundant life. What can be done to save us and creation?

In a world where so many are without clean water—let alone fine wine—where is the extravagance of God? What can be done to quench their thirst?

In a world where children play in bomb craters the size of 30-gallon wine jugs, why the divine reluctance? What can be done to resurrect a life where children around the world are free and safe to play and sing and learn?

² “The Wedding” by Terry Chapman, CREDO spiritual faculty



In a world where mothers watch as their small children suffer from disease and malnutrition because they have no food, why has the hour not yet come? What can be done for the hungry to have their fill?³

In a world where so many innocent lives are used as war-pawns to further agendas of selfish evil, is this not of concern to God? What can be done to soften the hardened hearts of militant dictators?

No matter what solutions you have or think you have, no matter your affiliations or allegiances, and no matter where you fall on the political spectrum or on the spectrum of *theodicy*... we still want to, and must in all honesty, tug at the sleeve of Jesus and say: “they have no wine.”

“For life happens on the threshold
Between the gasp and grasp”

Today is commitment Sunday, a day when you are invited to consider what concern is the work and witness of this church to you.

Now I could have stopped early in this sermon, saved us some time, and simply said, there is need in the world, let us take the concern to Jesus, and join the work of God’s transformation and abundance to keep the celebration of life going. But there is more to this story, and there is more to our commitment to giving.

Beloved, there will be a time when the “good wine” will also run out, when the wedding celebration comes to an end. Yet having tasted the goodness of God’s abundant love and grace, we will “never again be quenched by earth’s fruit.”

Between the gasp of noticing need and exclaiming “They have no wine” – and the grasp of opportunity and saying “Do whatever he tells you” – we put our trust in Jesus, in whom all things came into being.

Perhaps, alongside the mother of Jesus, we too are nudging the God of Abundance, to take our water, and transform it into the new wine of goodness, joy, and of life.

³ Ibid. 262.

