

**"Everyone . . . But You"**  
**Sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**Lectionary Year C**  
**January 17, 2010**  
**Text: John 2:1-11**  
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The story we have for this morning from John's Gospel is one of my favorites. No, it's not just because of this business about the wine, though that feature of the story does fascinate me more than a little. You realize, of course, that this biblical story is probably not everyone's favorite. I recall hearing about a time when an elderly matron in the church was waxing without end before a group of people on the evils of alcohol. One man in the crowd bravely reminded her of this Gospel story and that Jesus himself had turned water into wine. Undaunted, the determined woman of piety replied, "Yes, I know what Jesus did in that story, and I would hold him in much higher regard if he hadn't done that."

This story captures my attention for other reasons, and I want to suggest to you what it is that interests me about it. Let's follow the narrative as John lays it out for us, pausing along the way to talk about its several engaging features and what those details may have to say to us.

The story interests me, first of all, because in it **we see Jesus' willingness to participate in the celebrations of life.** John tells us there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee and that Jesus and his disciples had been invited. Think about what this says concerning Christ. He was on people's guest list, probably because he was the kind of person who mixed and mingled well, was enjoyable to be around. I imagine that he made people feel comfortable and at ease, and I also suspect that he was quite entertaining. Maybe when you were throwing a party in those days, Jesus was one of the first people you thought about including.

It seems that Jesus was as much at home at a backyard barbecue as he was at church. He didn't just preach and teach and heal. He didn't just pray all the time. He liked being with people in social settings, and people liked being with him, enough to have invited him to their celebrations. What this says to me is that the Christian life, the life of a follower of Jesus Christ, is not all work and no play. It is not all serious and sober and somber. It is not all deep and heavy and religious. It can be light and entertaining and relaxing and festive and joyous and spirited. For me, Jesus' being invited to this party means that being his disciple includes participating in the celebrations of life *as a part of the worship of God.*

Notice, though, that Jesus' being invited to the party means that he didn't crash it. He was a guest. He came by invitation; he didn't just drop in. That is still the way he comes to our party. *We must invite him.* He wants to attend all our celebrations, but he will not come unless we ask him.

The story interests me further, because in it **we see Jesus' concern for people's feelings.** John tells us that the worst thing that could happen at a party happened at this one, namely, "the wine gave out." Biblical commentators help us to see that this was no trivial matter for the host of such an event. To run out of wine was more than a disappointment; it was a violation of a social duty that established the host as either an honorable or a disgraced member of society. The host who wound up being wineless was in danger of a complete loss of face from which the host family might never recover, and the stigma could extend to the family for generations to come [Soards et al, p. 113]. To run out of wine was a major social *faux pas*.

It speaks volumes about the level of Jesus' care and concern for me to read in John's Gospel that Jesus' first miracle, or sign as John prefers to call it, is not the healing of some horribly ill person, not the raising of the dead, not the feeding of thousands of people, not the stilling of the storm, not the releasing of a legion of demons from a possessed person. No, not at all. *His first miracle is the saving of*

*someone from complete embarrassment.* To me, that says that Jesus is concerned not just about saving me from my sins and keeping me from going to hell, you know, the big religious stuff. *Jesus cares about all the unpleasant things that happen to me.* No problem, no crisis, no trouble I have in my life is beyond or below Jesus' concern. We can see from this story that Jesus cares about our feelings, and that interests me a great deal.

The story interests me for another reason, namely, that in it **we catch Jesus' own struggle with identity.** John tells us in this story that Jesus has "words" with his mother. As John narrates it, "When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what business is that of ours? My hour has not yet come.'" In the telling of this story, John wants his readers to understand upfront that Jesus performs his signs according to God's will and not in response to any person's wish or need, even his own mother's. Although his mother is an unwitting helper in this first sign, giving instructions to the servants, Jesus does not act at her bidding. He distances himself from her, indicating that *his ministry would be according to "his hour," his timetable, his agenda* [Craddock et al, p. 82].

As we do in the story of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple, we see in this story Jesus' sense of identity, his individuality, his

independence, his autonomy, and his self-differentiation. He does not act solely to please others, even those close to him. He acts so as to please God and himself.

Can we learn from this? Can this story help us to see how important it is for all of us to develop a strong sense of selfhood that is not overly dependent on what others think of us or what others demand of us? Can we learn from this story that to be like Jesus may mean that we live in radical submission to the will of God, yet we live in freedom from the manipulation and control and dominance of others? I am interested in this story because of what it teaches us about the importance of identity.

This story interests me for the reason that in it **we are allowed to taste a sample of Jesus' unimaginable generosity**. The next thing that John tells us in this story is about the water jars. As John describes the scene, "Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons." That's at least a hundred and fifty gallons of water that get turned into wine. Jesus makes more wine than the people at the party could ever consume [Soards et al, p. 114].

This feat points to the idea that the gifts of Jesus extend well beyond meeting the needs of the moment for health or safety or food or shelter. The amount of wine provided by the Lord here shows us

that the sheer abundance of the gifts Jesus brings to humankind extends beyond what we can ask or think or even imagine [Cousar et al, p. 111]. It is not just life that Jesus offers to us; it is *abundant life*, more life than we know what to do with, more life than we can live. Ours is no conservative or stingy Lord; God's grace extended to us in Christ is unbelievably extravagant and lavish. In Christ, God has met our deepest needs, and not simply adequately, but abundantly, and that captures my interest a great deal [Soards et al, p. 114].

Finally, what interests me the most about this story is the way it **points to Jesus' uniqueness and the idea that his way is different from that of the world.** John ends the story by telling us that the servants, at Jesus' request, fill the jars with water, draw some of the water out and take it to the chief steward. When the steward tastes what had then become wine, he takes the bridegroom aside and says to him, "You rascal, everyone else serves the good wine first and then the cheap stuff after the guests have become drunk. You know, you start with a pricey Cabernet or Merlot by Robert "Monsnobby," and when everyone is too plastered to care, you bring out the Ripple and the Thunderbird. That's what everyone else does. But you, you wild and crazy guy, have kept the best wine, the top shelf variety, the rare vintage, until the last." And John says that this is a sign.

It's a sign alright, a neon sign, a giant billboard, a flashing message on the side of the Goodyear blimp stating what we still don't quite get. *The ways of Jesus are not our ways.* He doesn't operate like we do. His agenda is different from ours. He turns everything around and upside down and backwards. The last things are first, and the first things are last. This Jesus will not do the expected, the ordinary, the routine. He is no upholder of the status quo. He is unpredictable. There is no telling what he might do. He might even do the unthinkable. He might even die a horrible death to win the salvation of the world.

This Jesus we call Lord and follow as his disciples won't be reduced to our limited perceptions of him and won't be bound to our narrow expectations of him. He won't fit neatly into some pigeon hole or label or category or stereotype. Jesus is over and greater and beyond who we can imagine him to be. John has it right. What this act of turning the water into wine does is nothing less or other than to reveal Jesus' glory, his holiness, his otherness, his lordship. So *our response must not be anything less than or other than faith.* With the disciples, we are to believe in him, putting our lives in his hands, and trusting that his way, though far different than ours, is the only way that leads to authentic, genuine, meaningful, and fulfilling life.

That life can be ours, but I think this story from John's Gospel may mean that as was true for Jesus, *we are not to be like everyone else*. What everyone else does is not to be what governs us ultimately. Everyone else may serve the good wine first, but that doesn't mean we have to. Everyone else may think a certain way, say certain things, act in certain ways, but we are not bound by that. We are to follow Christ, and that at times may put us at odds and even in conflict with the way everyone else thinks, talks, or behaves. But we are not called by God to be like everyone else; *we are called by God to be like Jesus*.

What an interesting story this is, because it points to what a wonderful Lord we have in Jesus. He celebrates with us; he cares about our feelings; he has struggled with the same identity issues we do, thus he identifies with us; he lavishly and freely gives us his abundant grace; and he calls us to follow him. What a story this is, but even more, what a Savior he is!