

“Is This Really Necessary?”

There’s a lot going on in this Gospel Lesson. At least, there is if you read or listen to a lot of sermons and sermonic studies. Some of them get strung out on the idea of the wedding at Cana somehow becomes a metaphor for the Bridegroom (Jesus) and His Bride (the Church). Some will focus in on the glorious stature of Mary in this story — how her faith is made evident by her instructing the servants to do whatever Jesus commands. Some zero in on those servants, and their obedience — hence the implication that, would we be as obedient, we too would see miracle occur. It strikes me as odd that none of the material I looked at preparing for this sermon even so much as mentioned the bride and bridegroom who were getting married at Cana; nor the family of these two newlyweds; nor, with one exception, the wine steward (what restaurants with \$250 bottles of Bordeaux choose to call the sommelier).

So with all that going on, what is this story about? In my estimation, this is a story about Jesus’ compassion and God’s love. But, unlike so many other stories in the Gospels, the circumstances in this story that require the action of love and compassion are less that compelling.

It’s one thing to be confronted with ten lepers — men afflicted with a disease that eats away on human tissue, and is so contagious that those afflicted are cut off from human contact. We, no doubt, would be overwhelmed to the point of paralysis if we were confronted with ten such sufferers; we would not know which step to take first; Jesus certainly would have been, indeed was, moved to powerful depths of compassion. Or a man born blind, a poor deaf man, a mute who is demon-possessed: such people’s afflictions left them destitute, cut off, regarded as defective, even evil. That our Lord would reach out to touch them is a given. Or that woman caught in the act of adultery and dragged naked before Jesus — this was truly a matter of life and death; she could have been (and the crowd was eager to do so) stoned to death for her actions (why the man, who obviously was also caught in the act, walked

away scot free escapes me).

So, we comprehend that some situations just demand action to bring relief, cure, and release. Is that what's going on a Cana? Hardly. It's a wedding. Now, I won't pretend that I have an encyclopedic knowledge of First Century Jewish wedding practices . . . but I know this much: Weddings were multi-day events, not the one-hour (if that) service at the church followed by three-to-six hours at the party center or reception hall. Everyone in the village would have been invited, as well as out-of-town relatives and friends (this last is the category that Jesus and the Twelve evidently fit). It was not a sedate gathering. There would be dancing (males with males; females with females — sorry, no hip-hop, or boot-skoot country line dancing — probably more like the hora). And there was food and wine . . . lots of wine . . . four, five, six days of wine.

Should Jesus be brought to tears over the shortening of a drinking bout? Is there a compelling human need here? Oh, sure, the couple and the families might suffer some embarrassment if the wine stock depleted too quickly — is that compelling enough a reason for Jesus to wade in with His very first miracle?

Would you? If your next-door neighbor was hosting his boss for a cookout and ran out of beer and asks if you could provide some for his party, would you do it? Some of us might want to ask: “*Was I invited to this shindig?*” What if it was getting on toward midnight and the party has been fairly boisterous — wouldn't more beer mean the party would keep going, robbing you of sleep and peace? What exactly is the nature of your relationship with this neighbor — barely know the guy to say “*Hello,*” to, or are you close buddies who golf and fish together?

All of which suggests that we might not view that request as an earth-shattering, basic human need — such as we are witnessing in places like Haiti, Kentucky, hospital wards across the country this week . . . that is, a compelling, literally life-and-death, human need. By comparison, does running out of wine at a wedding even come close? No! Yet, here is Jesus responding to this “minor inconvenience” with miraculous power.

What's this all about? Maybe it's a test run . . . after all, it is His first miracle. Maybe He thought this was an opportunity to test His miracle-performing wings; you know, try it out on something that didn't matter all that much to see if the juices were really flowing. Maybe the very fact that it is not a matter of life-or-death warrants Jesus dipping His divine toe into the human misery waters, so to speak, just to see if He has it. I don't think so.

John writes that this wedding began ***“On the third day . . .”*** Now that could have meant that it began on a Tuesday (Sunday is the first day, Monday the second day, Tuesday . . .), but more likely it means that this took place three days after the last things John was writing about — which, in this case, was the calling of Jesus' disciples.

According to John's Gospel, when He writes in our text that ***“Jesus and his disciples had . . . been invited to the wedding,”*** the number of disciples at that juncture would have been five: Andrew, Simon (Peter/Cephas), Philip, Nathaniel, and one as-yet unnamed (most scholars are pretty sure it was John). Was this miracle done for their benefit? John concludes our text: ***“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”*** Is that why the miracle was done — to clue in the disciples to Jesus' power and majesty? (If so, it had some, but didn't seem to have made the full impact.)

So why did Jesus roll up the heavenly-sleeves, turn on the God-juice, and snap off this miracle? First, if that is how we see this event, we are totally missing the point not only of this miracle, but all the miracles in the Bible. For some miracles, there is a definite “Wow!” factor — dead bodies coming back to life seems to fall into that category. This is clearly not one of those: First, it is all done behind the scenes; few people are in on the secret: apparently the disciples; certainly the servants (although we have no way of knowing how many there were); it's not even clear if Mary knew of the actual miracle, although it is clear that she anticipated at least something like it. That's it!

The people most directly impacted by the event don't know it happened: the wine steward, the bride and groom, the families, the other guests have no clue that the wine they are chugging back came from the miraculous hand of Jesus. I love that scene in the video presentation of "The Cotton Patch Gospel," (if you haven't seen it, get hold of a copy on DVD) where this event is acted out: Jesus goes into a closet, turns on the water over the sink, and looks up to heaven and says, "*Oh, Daddy, they've made me the bartender.*" Yeah. That's what this seems to be all about. But we're pretty sure that this is not ALL that it can be about.

Come on . . . God is my bartender? That's no more ridiculous than hearing a certain baseball player affirm that his batting skills did not come from the drugs he ingested but "*from the big guy upstairs.*" I find that phrase highly offensive.

Here's the deal — and I will confess that I am by no means the first person to pick up on this — there is nothing that is going on in your life in which God is not interested. Other people may nod off, or their eyes glaze over, when you begin to talk about your passion for collecting tea cozies or your love for watching poker on TV (did I just reveal something about me? You bet!) — but God is just fascinated by your hobbies.

We have a way in our culture of discounting our own needs and the needs of others. I do it. I was speaking some months ago with my friend Cindy Olsen about a somewhat negative occurrence that week, and I said, "*Well throw me a 'pity party.'*" and Cindy came back to say, "*Stop that! That's a wound! Deal with it appropriately.*" She was right.

It's even worse when someone else discounts, or dismisses, the pain that comes into our lives. Messages like, "*Get over it!*" or "*Suck it up, ya wuss!*" do little to help healing come in the midst of pain. [Have you seen those TV ads about mental health that respond to advice given with the phrase, "That's not helpful"? Of course not.]

So what if the wedding did have to end early? Wouldn't everybody just "get over it" fairly quickly? I don't know . . . and neither do you.

How long should one grieve the loss of a spouse? What is the appropriate time of grieving for a dent in the door of your less-than-a-week-old car? How long is one allowed to mope after losing the state championship game (you name the sport)? Can you set a timetable or measure the importance of events for which you are an outside observer?

Is that what this miracle account is about? Could it be simple as to suggest that our every need — no matter its significance or lack thereof — is important to God? I do think that is what it's about. Let's face it — in the grand scheme of things, on the scale of misery, or injustice, on the pain meter — cutting short a wedding bash because you run out of wine does not seem to be all that big a deal. Until you are the one facing it.

Minor surgery is what happens to somebody else — my surgery, no matter what the procedure, is major surgery. That put-down at school, that threatening gesture by the driver next to you, the laughter of peers at your expense . . . these may not seem like they should even be considered alongside the need of the person who's just been told that the tumor is malignant, but there is nothing in your life that is unimportant to God.

We, on the other hand, will consider many things unimportant. *“No need to go to prayer over that . . . that's no big deal.” “I don't need God to take care of this; I can handle this problem.” “I won't even bother the doctor with that question; he's much too busy — I'll wait until there's a good reason to bring it up.”* Your unbalanced checkbook is of interest to God. The upcoming biology exam is on God's radar screen as well as yours. That flinch of pain in your index finger pulls at the heart of God . . . even if you want to dismiss it as *“just old age creeping in.”*

The next time you decide to censor your compassion monitor — for yourself or in response to someone else — because it just doesn't seem to be all that critical or necessary . . . Remember these four words, ***“They have no wine.”*** Big deal? Big deal! So big, it took a miracle to address it. Is there some place in your life you need a miracle today? Jesus stands ready to be your “bartender.”

Amen.