

John 2:1-11
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Dearly Beloved

About a year ago in an article entitled “Americans Need to Party More,” author Ellen Cushing writes, “Everyone wants to attend parties, but no one wants to throw them. We just expect them to appear when we need them, like fire trucks.” Writing about the epidemic levels of loneliness Americans were—and still are—experiencing, she also points out that:

The time we spend socializing in person has plummeted in the past decade, and anxiety and hopelessness have increased. Roughly one in eight Americans reports having no friends; the rest of us, according to [a] colleague Olga Khazan, never *see* our friends, stymied by the logistics of scheduling in a world that has become much more frenetic and much less organized around religion and civic clubs. ‘You can’t,’ [Khazan] writes, ‘just show up on a Sunday and find a few hundred of your friends in the same building.’¹

That last point stings a bit. I like to think we show up here on Sunday mornings and find all sorts of friends and connections. So I might be tempted to push back, a little anyway, and yet I know that there are people who sit in these pews, perhaps even every Sunday, and many still outside these walls who feel incredibly disconnected and lonely, who long for a place and a people where they feel joy and belonging, if not a party over-flowing with laughter and really good wine.

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2025/01/throw-more-parties-loneliness/681203/>

This morning's text takes place at a party, and not just any party, a wedding. We are not told what the bride wore or whether they had a DJ or a string quartet or any music at all. What we are told is that Jesus, his mother, and his disciples are on the guest list. Weddings in Jesus' day were multi-day affairs that centered on the joining of two families, forging another strong bond in an already tight-knit community. There are expectations that certain customs be observed, not the least of which is having enough wine for everyone. To run out would not simply be a faux pas but an affront to the honor of the guests and the hosts. When Jesus' mother (who is never named in John's gospel) tells him that the wine has run out, she is not simply worried about an awkward moment, she is raising a concern for the community gathered in that place, a concern that she seems to think Jesus can address. And then Jesus responds with what sounds like a bit of back talk, at least to my ears. Scholars assure me that Jesus is not being a bad son; he is simply responding to his mother's observation with language typical of his day. So it's not a big deal that he calls his mother *woman*. That said, my advice to anyone and everyone listening is this: do not try this at home. "What concern is it to me and to you?" Jesus asks her, "My hour has not yet come." She responds by telling the servants to do whatever Jesus asks.

Scholar Karoline Lewis wonders what Jesus' mother sees in this moment. Lewis points out that even without the story of a manger and the angels, Jesus, God's Word made flesh is born to and raised by his mother. Theirs is a relationship that hopefully looks familiar to many of us, the relationship when a parent sees her child's gifts and strengths. Perhaps his mother trusts in Jesus and is nudging and encouraging him to be who she knows him to be.² Whatever the

² Karoline M. Lewis, *John*, Fortress Biblical Commentaries, 38.

backstory or rationale, Jesus seems to decide that the matter is in fact his concern, that the rupture in the community caused by a lack of wine is reason enough to act. And act he does, with help from the servants. He tells them to fill the enormous water jugs, and they do, to the brim in fact. He then instructs them to share a sample with the head steward, and that is the last we hear from him in this story. The head steward tastes the wine, and wonders aloud to the groom why the groom would do something as wasteful as serving the good stuff when everyone is already several drinks in. Only the servants, the disciples, Jesus and his mother know the full story, along with us, of course. A crisis is avoided, really good wine is shared and enjoyed, and John tells us that the disciples “believed in him,” revealing a deeper connection and devotion than they felt or knew before.

Some have wondered why this would be Jesus’ first sign. After all, it largely flies under the radar with no fanfare. Jesus will draw lots of attention to himself in the next verses when he heads to the Temple, but here he uses his power on a small, quiet scale to perform what some might write off as a party trick. We often describe this water into wine event as his first miracle, but John intentionally uses the word “sign,” meaning that this event points beyond itself and reveals something about Jesus and the kingdom he is ushering in. Here in this relatively quiet miracle moment, we are told that Jesus “revealed his glory” in transforming ordinary water into the very best wine, in saving a community from shame and broken promises, enabling joy and connection to thrive on a very human scale.

While I have been known to grumble about weddings on occasion, I remain in awe of the joy and connection that blossom even when a thunderstorm upends the best laid plans or when a flower girl goes rogue and refuses to budge from the back of the sanctuary or when the

photographer runs late and causes the usually cool, calm, and collected father of the bride to clench his teeth and utter some things that probably shouldn't be said in church. I love the flowers, the music, and seeing the smiles and tears of those who love the couple witnessing the couple as they begin a new chapter together. And, as will surprise almost no one, I love the wedding liturgy, the words we use and the promises we make when we celebrate a wedding together. In the worship service from our Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, there are newer pieces that I encourage couples to use in the midst of the service, questions that remind everyone present that a marriage is not simply about the two people making vows at the front of the sanctuary. The first is a question to the couple's families:

Do you, the families give [these two] your blessing,
promise to uphold them in their marriage,
and encourage them in their life together?

The second is a question to everyone gathered:

Do all of you witnessing these vows
promise to uphold [these two] in their marriage
and encourage them in their life together?

A few years ago, a bride asked me if she and the groom could turn and face the congregation when these questions were asked. She wanted to catch a glimpse of those who had gathered around them for this moment as these dear ones promised to encourage her and her groom in their new life together. I've since invited other couples—if they are up to it—to do the same, and it brings tears to my eyes every single time, because in those moments I get to see genuine love, commitment, and community forged come alive in real time.

I also appreciate that the prayers in the service speak not simply of the couple but of all who have gathered in that moment, once again acknowledging that something good and joyful and hopeful is reflected in these moments, too. One prayer concludes:

Bless those gathered here today,

that all who witness these vows may find their hope renewed

and know the depth of your love and care for them and for this world you cherish.

May they know the depth of your love and care for them and for this world you cherish.

Weddings are rare events when we get to see lovely ideals such as love, hope, and commitment embodied in real time. Words take on flesh, not unlike Jesus taking on flesh to show us God's love, God's grace face to face.

This wedding at Cana is not just about the couple, nor is it only about the two families. No wedding is. It's not even only all about Jesus. Wine running out would bring shame to the groom's family; it would also bring an abrupt halt to the laughter, the conversations, the connections, and the joy for everyone there. By saving the day with an extravagant, unearned gift of abundant, really good wine, Jesus enables the joy and connection to continue and gives everyone there a glimpse of what God intends not simply for a few favored guests but for the world God cherishes, even if they don't know it yet.

Some may wonder if talk of joy and love and good wine makes sense right now. Are we distracting ourselves from the real task at hand? Shouldn't Jesus get on with confronting the hypocrites and overturning tables? Shouldn't we? Those are fair questions. **And** I think those questions risk missing a crucial point. Grace—abundant, undeserved grace comes first, last, and always. Wine runs out. The grace of God does not. Jesus, will soon move into moments of

confrontation and conflict with an angry and hostile world. Because, in case we forget, Jesus lives and moves and has his being in a land occupied by oppressive forces who have little to no concern for the lives of the likes of Jesus, his family, and disciples. Those in charge concern themselves with power and might and with taking and taking some more. In stark contrast, the God we meet in Jesus Christ repeatedly confronts those powers and concerns himself with the lives of ordinary people, all people in fact, and with redeeming and rebuilding the human family, person by person, family by family, community by community. And that work will cost him his life. In this wedding moment, his rebuilding work is not loud or brash. Here his work does not draw attention to itself. Jesus doesn't even take credit for saving the day, after all. He does, however, begin his public ministry by transforming water into wine for one very human celebration and by quietly establishing a foundation of grace and hope for all that is to come.

This same quiet and holy work continues even now. This work happens around tables and across aisles, and yes, when we extend the abundant grace and good wine that both arrive, no thanks to us. This work happens when we vow to love one another—including our neighbors and our enemies—for better or worse, in sickness and in health, and when we realize that the wine running out is not simply someone else's problem but our concern, too.

Dearly beloved, every time we gather at this table, we are reminded that the meal we share is both a time to remember Christ's sacrifice and a chance to receive a foretaste of the joyful banquet—the very best party—that we will share with God's people in the kingdom of God. Maybe Ms. Cushing is right. Maybe the solution to our loneliness and our fractured human family is to throw more parties. You and I know, however, that no matter how carefully we plan our parties, the wine will run out. God's grace does not and will not. So perhaps we might spend

a bit more time and energy relishing the very best party, one party we need most, the one we are given in Jesus Christ. Maybe we begin by savoring the good wine and the welcome and the grace Christ pours out for us and for all by inviting others to do the same.

Make no mistake, there is good and faithful work waiting for us outside those doors, work that we are urgently called to do in Christ's name and for his sake. **And** it is crucial to remember that grace—abundant and undeserved—comes first and last and always. So perhaps we can invite friends and strangers—God's dearly beloved one and all—to join us at **this** party where Christ is the most gracious and generous of hosts. In his name and for his sake, let us open the door a bit wider, make the guest list a bit longer, pull up some extra chairs, and hand out more glasses as we give thanks for and draw courage from the extravagant and unending grace poured out for us and for all in God's dearly beloved Son.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.