

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

**The Reverend Mark S. Merrill**

January 14, 2007

**180 GALLONS?**

John 2:1-11

Many of you as parents have had to pay for a family wedding and the reception that follows. You are aware of the challenges that can be to stay within a certain budget, at whatever level you have set. My hunch is that you would all be grateful not to have to abide by the wedding customs of biblical times. You see, the wedding celebration lasted for at least a week. The entire village was invited to it. It is not that it was a 24-hour party for 7 successive days, and not everyone invited celebrated each and every day. "But each evening of the week brought some renewal of the festivities and those who have been invited in the first place were warmly received until the week had expired..." The festivities would have included eating, drinking, making music, and more.

It was to this kind of wedding and festivities that Jesus and his disciples would have been invited. The reading from John's Gospel sets us in the middle of the festivities. We read, 'on the third day there was a wedding'. You might ask, 'the third day of what?' or 'the third day from what?' However these questions might be answered, 'the third day' links this event to the numbered days in chapter 1 of the Gospel of John, and also looks forward to Jesus' resurrection 'on the third day'.

We read that the mother of Jesus was there and that Jesus and his disciples had also been invited. The wedding families considered it perfectly natural to invite Jesus to the wedding and week-long party. Now those invited might be expected to contribute provisions, such as wine. We are then told that the wine for this week-long reception has run out. It doesn't matter what the reason was for this – that not enough wine had been brought to the party or that more people came than were expected, or maybe both.

This could have been a most embarrassing situation for the family, threatening a serious loss of honor.

That Mary told Jesus of the situation has led to all kinds of speculation about why this would have been of particular concern to her. Please note, though, that she is not called by her name in this passage; nor actually anywhere else in this gospel. She is only called 'the mother of Jesus'. Mary only tells Jesus that 'they have no wine'; she identifies the problem, but does not make a request or tell Jesus what to do. Knowing the potential for disaster this shortage could cause, it is implied that she thinks Jesus should be concerned, as well, - out of sympathy for the family as a guest, a friend, or maybe even as a relative. Jesus responds, and addresses his mother as 'Woman'. This might seem to be an aloof, cold, even disrespectful term for his mother.

It is unusual and does downplay the ties of family; though some have called it a term of solemn and respectful address. Remember, Mary is referred to as 'the mother of Jesus' and he calls her 'Woman'. In John 19 as Jesus is dying on the cross we read, "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.'" So at the beginning and the end, this way of referring to Mary brackets this Gospel story.

Jesus' words in response to his mother again imply an aloofness and lack of respect for the hosts. Why should this concern either you or me is how Jesus responds. He continues by saying, 'My hour has not yet come'. Requests of family, friends, or those in need, even family ties, will not cause Jesus to act. No one on earth was to dictate when or how Jesus would act. Jesus was asserting his freedom from all human control. Jesus' ministry was only to be under God's direction.

There was an appropriate time and place for each action, and Jesus would act only as directed by God's will. And for the Gospel of John, the word 'hour' symbolically refers to the hour of Jesus' glorification – his death, resurrection, and ascension. "The hour of Jesus' self-disclosure was determined by God, not by Mary's desires. The signs that Jesus does all point to **the** sign, his death and resurrection. This hour cannot be rushed, cannot come at human initiative." And so, both how Mary is referred to in these verses and the reference point for the word 'hour' point us to John 19 and the crucifixion of Jesus.

Considering that Mary could have easily heard Jesus' words to her as words of rebuff, it is most interesting to hear her response, "Do whatever he tells you." First, though, notice to whom she speaks. It is the servants of the host family. It is intriguing to ponder what is the relationship of Mary to this family that she can thus speak to the servants and expect they will listen and respond appropriately?

The words also indicate that Mary knows, believes, has the utter confidence, that Jesus will want to and can do something to rectify this embarrassing situation. Somehow she realizes that he has powers and capabilities beyond the norm. The scene moves on as we are told of the 6 stone jars for the Jewish rites of purification – large stone jars, each holding 20 or 30 gallons. These jars would hold the water used for the ritual cleansing of hands at meals. Stone was used because it was believed that it could not become ritually unclean.

Most commentators hold that the number and size of these stone water jars is excessive even for a large wedding. The number and size of the jars would seem to indicate they were more appropriate for the Temple in Jerusalem than for a village wedding. They are such to help us understand the extravagance of the miracle yet to come.

Jesus tells the servants to 'Fill the jars with water.' Does this imply that the jars are empty or are the jars partially full? We do not know. But we do know that if they were empty the servants had to draw a large quantity of water to fill them up to 180 gallons. And note what the servants did – they filled the jars up to the brim. There is no skimping here – there will be made available the most possible, almost an over-abundance. This abundance might lead us to think of the feeding of the 5000, and of the abundance of God's love, forgiveness, mercy and grace.

As Jesus speaks we can see that he is in charge at this point and that he is responsible for the miraculous transformation of the water into wine; though it is not until the steward tastes what has been given to him by the servants that we are told that a miracle has occurred. 180 gallons - it is an extravagant, fabulous amount of wine, not heard of in a village wedding celebration. Again, John is hinting at something more than this earthly occurrence.

The steward's words to the bridegroom also seem to indicate a common practice at these long wedding festivities – good wine was served first when guests would be able to tell the difference. It was after they had drunk so much that inferior wine would be served. But it is not an inferior wine that

Jesus has made – it is a good wine, better than the “good” wine that would have already been served at this wedding feast.

We learn that “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory ...” This story is unique to the Gospel of John. It points to the meaning of the coming of Jesus. “Sign” is the term used in John’s Gospel for miracle. It indicates that the miracles point beyond themselves to God’s revelation in Jesus.

It is important to note the location of this first sign of Jesus. It was not in a major city, or at the Temple, or at a celebration at the court of a governor, king or emperor. It was not done to draw media attention to himself. It was done in a small village and took place in the daily lives of average people. This is where Jesus meets us – in our day to day living, in the mundane details of our lives, not in some possible, hoped-for, future extraordinary situation. Though the wedding and festivities were a most special time in the lives of the wedding couple and their families, this was not a media event wedding – just one of countless that occurred in towns, villages and cities all around Galilee. Jesus came to and accepted people where he found them, and in this case he helped an embarrassed village groom out of a jam. Jesus went to the people, to the places of commerce and human interaction where people lived out the basic stuff of life. In what he did, he reminds us that God cares enough to help.

Gail O’ Day has written, “This first miracle takes place in the presence of friends and family, not in the presence of powers and authorities. This opening to Jesus’ ministry shows that the miraculous life-giving power of God is at work even [and perhaps, especially] in the intimate daily places of human lives.”

And Tom Ehrich wrote, “Jesus addressed one problem at a time, starting with a depleted wine supply. One moment after another, one life touched, one situation handled. Jesus trusted in God to take his small gestures and use them for good. This happened at a wedding, a well, a friend’s tomb, a lonely mountain, and a wooden cross.”

We may rightly read into this text that God blesses us abundantly, just as Jesus made sure that there would be an overabundance of wine at this wedding festival. God never tires of loving. God fills and blesses our lives to the brim with more than enough to last our entire lifetimes. God’s blessings and our talents, gifts and abilities are there in our lives no matter where we are on our life journeys. We do not use up the blessings and love of God early in our lives. God’s journey with us is for our entire lives. “God has the power to give us more than just what we need; God surprises us with unnecessary abundance,” as Carolyn Brown writes.

So come to the table to partake of God’s more than ample blessings and bounty. Come to experience God’s overflowing love and receive sustenance for your daily living. Know that at this table we are being offered the very life of Jesus – a life full of joy, eternal life.