

*Celebrating, feasting, delighting*  
*Epiphany 2C, John 2:1-11*

The miracle in Cana is well-known. We know the story well. Jesus, his mother, and his disciples are at a wedding. And Jesus saves the day by turning ordinary water into wine. Fine wine, no less. And the celebrating and feasting continues as more wine is poured. This is Jesus' first miracle, or sign, in the Gospel of John.

But the real miracle of the day was much bigger than the wine that was poured out for those particular wedding guests. The real miracle was so big that we are still feasting and celebrating today. To see the sign, in all its glory, we need to look at this wedding event in its context.

As we know, John begins his Gospel, "in the beginning." John is telling a creation story. "In the beginning was the Word..." After the prologue, John marks the beginning of each new day with "the next day," reminding us of the seven days of creation. On the first "next day," John the Baptist introduces Jesus as the "Lamb of God." On the second "next day" John the Baptist again calls him, "Lamb of God." And Jesus invites his first disciples to "Come and see." On the third "next day" (which is now the fourth day from the beginning), Jesus calls more disciples to follow him.

Chapter 2 begins with, "on the third day." In this creation story, John has jumped from the fourth day to the seventh day. The seventh day of creation. The Sabbath. And this Sabbath is characterized by gathering and feasting. This Sabbath is about the joy and celebration of family and friends. And it wasn't a stingy one-afternoon or one-day event. No, these weddings lasted seven days as family and friends from far and near came to join the family and bless the new covenant relationship that had been made.

“On the third day,” in addition to taking us to Sabbath, also directs our gaze to the tomb and resurrection. This creation account that John is giving us begins with the end in our sight. First Jesus has twice been introduced as the Lamb of God, and now we have the three-day interval, the interval between death and resurrection. The end is the beginning.

So, on this seventh day, Jesus and the disciples join his mother at a wedding in Cana. And when there was no more wine for the wedding guests, the mother of Jesus takes action. Notice that John doesn’t call her Mary. He only refers to her as “the mother of Jesus.” At some point during the feasting and celebrating, Jesus’ mother brings this information about the wine running out to Jesus. He answers her with, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.”

His response seems troubling, doesn’t it? It sounds cold and harsh. Some translations add “dear woman” to try to soften it. It sounds as though he’s treating her like a silly woman who should be minding her own business. But the way we hear his response has surely been shaped by societal and cultural views that diminish women. The word “concern” isn’t from the Greek. That’s supplied by translators. What if Jesus is actually asking his mother, “Is this for you and me?” What if Jesus is seeking his mother’s counsel? Maybe he really wants her guidance here and is looking to her. Even if Jesus is saying No, she isn’t taking No for an answer! She acts anyway. Since the time Jesus, the Word of God, was in her womb, she’s been waiting and listening for God’s time. And now she recognizes the quickening in her body. She knows that Jesus’ hour has come; the hour is now. And with full and absolute trust, as soon as his mother acts, Jesus participates.

Mary gives a simple instruction to the servants. They too will participate in bringing about this miracle. She tells them, “Do whatever Jesus tells you.” And Jesus is ready with his instruction, “Fill the jars with water.” These aren’t just any jars, John lets us know, they’re

jars used for purification rituals. And they're made of stone. When guests arrive from their journeying, they need to be ritually cleansed before they can come to the table to join the feasting and celebrating. So the servants fill the jars, all six of these huge, 20-30 gallon jars. Still following Jesus' instruction, they draw water from the jars, take it to the person in charge, who tastes good wine, better wine than had already been served. Free cases of fine wine! And the family is saved from the embarrassment and shame of running out of wine. And it was good. Very good.

This first miracle is turning water into wine so that wedding guests can continue to be together, dancing, eating, laughing, delighting in being together with family and friends, with those they love. What an extravagant miracle!

But the miracle is even bigger and more extravagant than this first telling of the story. When we see and hear the layers of what has just happened, we see the glory of Jesus even more brightly.

In the first telling of the story it's easy to focus on the wine for the wedding guests. Turning water into wine meant they didn't have to stop the celebration. But if we tell the story again, from the view of the servants we hear and see something else. Outside the kitchen, no one knows where the wine came from. No one knows there's been a miracle. But the servants, those who weren't part of the feasting and celebrating, know. They know it was drawn from the stone jars, from water intended for ritual cleansing. They know because they carried all that water from the well. The servants know that something much bigger than wine for the guests has happened. They may not be invited wedding guests, but we can be sure they understood the implications of this miracle. And they too raised a glass to the glory they'd just seen.

The servants witnessed water turning into wine. But the ones serving the guests were more than witnesses, they were participants in bringing about this miracle. They knew the wine had been water drawn from the stone jars. The jars, the stone jars, that held water for ritual purification, had been empty. They were literally empty. But the servants, those excluded and on the margins, understood the symbolism of Jesus' actions. Every day they experienced with their bodies and lives the emptiness of these stone jars were. These servants, the last and the least at the wedding, understood that Jesus was opening a new space, one they were already invited into. These servants knew that the Word of God given to Moses, a Word written on stone tablets, had, in many ways, turned to stone. Words intended to be good and life-giving had become hard and harsh. Words intended for life were being used to bind and separate people, from each other and from God.

The mother of Jesus knows what it is to be on the margins and excluded. And she knows that God is right there, with the uninvited, the last, the least. She recognized the emptiness of the stone jars, their literal emptiness. Their figurative emptiness. And so on this seventh day of creation, on this Sabbath day, Jesus, the Word of God made flesh, was pouring a new Word into the stone jars. Jesus fills the empty space with wine, the wine of gladness, wine for rejoicing, wine for celebrating and feasting and delighting. This creation story that John is telling is the Good News! The servants witnessed and participated...and we witness and participate in the Good News that Jesus has come to fill empty spaces. Where the waters of our religion and rituals and our best intentions, where the "waters of our humanity"<sup>ni</sup> itself have run dry, Jesus has come to pour wine, filling us with joy and gladness. And...the wine that Jesus, the Living Word pours into us never run short!

And now we go back to the exchange between Jesus and his mother, when he calls her "Woman." Why does he do that? Part of what makes that interaction sound harsh and

cold is that “woman” doesn’t recognize the warmth of the familial relationship. Why not call her mother? To answer this question, we need to remember that John begins his Gospel with the end in sight. So when we look, after this wedding, we don’t see Jesus’ mother again until Jesus is on the cross. There on the cross, Jesus has another exchange with his mother. Ch 19 v 26, “When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.”

When we remember that John is telling a creation story, then “woman” refers to the first woman. John is likening the mother of Jesus to Eve, the mother of humanity, the mother of life. So, as John is telling the story, Jesus is relating to Mary not as his mother, but as Eve, woman. And on the cross, his death gives birth to a new humanity. Jesus’ death is part of the creation story, the completion of the creation story. He has given birth to a new way of being human. Here, at his end, the woman is his mother. Here, as a new humanity has been birthed, the woman becomes the mother of the disciples, of us.

The new way of being human is characterized by love, a self-emptying love. A love that begins with the end in sight. In the days and hours leading up to this exchange on the cross, Jesus has been teaching the disciples about this love, about this way of being human with each other, emptying ourselves to have our humanity filled with the wine of love, of joy, of celebration, and feasting. He’s been telling them about dwelling in the vine, living in the vine that will produce unending supplies of wine. He instructed them and showed them how to love each other, how to kneel at each other’s feet with grace and forgiveness, how to be servants to each other. This is the kind of love that distinguishes the new way of being human. Love that is gratuitous. Abundant. Extravagant. Love. It is his death that gives birth to such love. And the woman, his mother, is the mother of this new humanity.

Jean Vanier, who we know as someone who worked with those on the margins of society, in his commentary on the book of John, write, “Jesus reveals that our final destiny is love and that we are all called to a wonderful sacred wedding feast. But to live this celebration the waters of our humanity have to be transformed into the new wine of divine love.”<sup>ii</sup>

Following Jesus, Martin Luther King Jr. also had the end in sight. The Beloved Community that he saw is the new humanity of love. In a speech at a victory rally, after a favorable U.S. Supreme Court Decision desegregating the seats on Montgomery’s busses, King said,

“the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men [and women].”<sup>iii</sup>

So today we celebrate the miracle that turned water into wine, the miracle that continues to turn the waters of our empty humanity into wine, giving birth to the beloved community. May we continue to give ourselves, our bodied vessels, to be filled with the wine of God’s love, participants in the “exuberant gladness of the new age.”

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<sup>i</sup> Jean Vanier from his John commentary.

<sup>ii</sup> Jean Vanier

<sup>iii</sup> [thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy](http://thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy)