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Every Miracle Begins With A Problem

John 2:1-11

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The Gospel of John is distinct from the other three Gospels in a number of ways. In the fourth Gospel, there's no birth story as in Matthew and Luke; rather, it opens like the book of Genesis, *"In the beginning."* In John, Jesus delivers no Sermon on the Mount (or Plain). He tells no parables, heals no lepers, does not instruct his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer, and does not institute the Lord's Supper on the night of his betrayal and arrest. The kinds of moral teaching and spiritual instruction associated with Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke are almost completely absent from John, as are Jesus' typically brief sayings such as *"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's"* Mark 12:17 (KJV). John's Gospel is structured by **the "I am" sayings of Jesus** that reveal different facets of Jesus' identity and purpose. We'll be looking at those in February and March and what they tell us about Jesus and what he offers to those who trust and follow him. John's Gospel also features Jesus performing a number of **signs** that lead some who witness them, but not everyone who does, to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. The first sign takes place at a wedding.

What are some of your favorite wedding memories? It could be your own wedding, or that of a child, another family member or friend. What made that particular wedding special for you? Most of us have at least a few wedding stories we can tell. John certainly does. Listen to **John 2:1-11** and the first sign that Jesus did.

**"On the third day** there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and **the mother of Jesus** was there. **Jesus and his disciples** had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ***"They have no wine."*** And Jesus said to her, ***"Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."*** His mother said to the servants, ***"Do whatever he tells you."*** Now standing there were **six stone water jars** for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding **twenty or thirty gallons**.

Jesus said to them, *"Fill the jars with water."* And they filled them up to the brim.

He said to them, *"Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward."*

So they took it. When **the steward** tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him,

*“Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.”*

Jesus did this, **the first of his signs**, in Cana of Galilee, **and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.**”

The theme I want to highlight today is **Every Miracle Begins with a Problem**. John’s wedding story begins **on the third day** after Jesus called Philip and Nathanael to follow him, four days after Andrew and Simon Peter began to follow Jesus. The disciples are in their first days of being with Jesus, it’s their orientation period, and they’re learning about who he is. The problem occurs at a wedding attended by the mother of Jesus as well as Jesus and his new disciples. **In John’s Gospel, the mother of Jesus is present only twice - in Cana and at the cross (2:1-5 & 19:25-27)**. She’s present at the first of his signs and at the culmination of his work. This may surprise some of you, but in **John we never learn her name**. She’s only referred to as, **“the mother of Jesus.”** The first time we see her is at a wedding in Cana, a small village nine miles northwest of Nazareth. The wedding at Cana took place **on the third day**, as would the resurrection of Jesus.

In that culture, a wedding celebration was a weeklong event of eating, drinking, dancing, and visiting, and in the hospitality tradition of the Middle East, it would be a great embarrassment and humiliation to run out of wine at one of the most important moments in a family’s life. Unfortunately, that’s what happens. The mother of Jesus says to her son: *“They have no wine (2:3).”* The implication is that she wants Jesus to do something about it.

Jesus responds by calling her **“woman”** (2:4a), a term that could be used for other women without disrespect, but not one that a son would use for his mother. Jesus uses the same term when he speaks to the Samaritan woman in John 4:21 and Mary Magdalene in John 20:13. Jesus says, **“Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? Or “What have you to do with me?”** This phrase or a slight variation of it, occurs a number of times in the Bible (see Judges 11:12; 1 Kings 17:18; 2 Kings 3:13; 2

Chronicles 35:21; Mark 1:24; 5:7), and is used to establish distance between the person speaking and the one being spoken to, and often with a tone of warning or agitation. We might paraphrase it by saying something, like, “*Woman, that’s not my problem. Do I look like the caterer?*” Jesus seems at least a little irritated by his mother’s comment, “*They have no wine,*” and implying that he should do something about it.

Jesus tells her, “***My hour has not yet come.***” It’s not yet time for Jesus to fully reveal who he is, that was determined by God and not by his mother’s desire or anyone else’s need or situation. As John’s gospel unfolds we learn that Jesus’ “hour” is the hour of his passion (John 7:30; 8:20) – meaning his suffering, death, and resurrection. This unusual exchange between Jesus and his mother has to be understood not on the level of a typical mother and son conversation but in light of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Undeterred by Jesus’ reply, **believing he can help when there is problem**, his mother turns to the servants and says, “***Do whatever he tells you.***”

This is good advice, and it’s meant not just for the servants but for all who would follow Jesus. **The mother of Jesus has confidence and trust in Jesus and that’s the beginning of faith.** She says, “***Do whatever he tells you,***” act in trust and obedience to what Jesus tells you to do. Sometimes this is the first step toward God acting in your life. If the servants hadn’t trusted Jesus, if they’d been disobedient, if they’d ignored his instructions, then there would’ve been no miracle, no water into wine, no blessing for the bride and groom, family and guests, no sign for the disciples to help them believe in Jesus. **Doing what Jesus tells you to do is, for John, the essence of discipleship and the best way to live if you’re seeking life in all its fullness.** “***Do whatever he tells you,***” is not just a mother’s instruction to servants at a wedding – **it’s a motto for Christian living.**

George MacDonald (10 December 1824 – 18 September 1905) was a Scottish pastor, teacher, public speaker, and writer of fairytales who influenced C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, and many others. He wrote about discipleship and doing what Jesus tells you to do in the book *Creation in Christ*. “**Get up, and do something the Master tells you;** so make yourself a disciple at once. Instead of asking whether you believe or not, ask yourself whether you have this day **done one thing because he said, Do it,** or once abstained because he said, **Do not do it.** It is simply absurd to say you believe, or

even want to believe in him, if you do not do anything he tells you. If you can think of nothing he ever said as having had an atom of influence on your doing and not doing, you have too good ground to consider yourself no disciple of his.

But you can begin at once to *be* a disciple of the Living One – **by obeying him in the first thing you can think of in which you are not obeying him.** We must learn to obey him in everything, and so we must begin somewhere. Let it be at once, and in the very thing that lies at the door of our conscience!”

**Miracles can happen when you begin doing what Jesus tells you to do.**

When you need to forgive someone or to receive someone’s forgiveness – do what he tells you to do. When it comes to serving the poor and under resourced, do what he tells you to do. **When you have a problem in your life, like the mother of Jesus, trust in Jesus’ ability to act, and like the servants, do what he tells you to do.**

The story in John 2 continues with the observation that there were six stone jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each capable of holding 20-30 gallons. Stone jars, in contrast to earthen ware, were free from the possibility of impurity. Many of the Jewish rites of purification – including the ritual cleansing of hands before meals – are medically sound. Many of the scriptures related to being ritually clean are wise public health initiatives. The new wine of Jesus is created in these “old” vessels of Jewish purification rites. The old forms are given new content. The empty jars stood waiting to be filled, in the same way the story encourages you to reflect, ***“How am I like an empty vessel waiting to be filled by the new wine of Jesus?”***

If there’s such a thing as a formula for miracles – it seems they all begin with a problem. **Then you start with what you have** - they at least had containers and water. They needed wine. In the midst of an ordinary family’s celebration – the hidden glory of Jesus God’s Son is revealed unexpectedly. We also should look for the hidden glory of Jesus in the midst of our ordinary life. Jesus turned an astonishing amount of water into wine, 120-180 gallons - for a small wedding in a village.

At the start of the fourth gospel, John begins to paint a rich portrait of who Jesus is – that portrait will be completed at the appointed “hour.” This is just the first of many signs that reveal the glory of Jesus, which enable us to see who Jesus truly is, so we might believe in him. Jesus in the fourth Gospel is kind of like Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne,

or Peter Parker. Those ordinary names aren't as well-known as Superman, Bat Man, and Spiderman. Those superheroes lead ordinary lives on the one hand, people know them as the fastest typing reporter for the Daily Planet, a rich philanthropist, and a photographer, but they're much more. They all perform signs that reveal a glimpse of their true identity and power to those who are able to see and believe. The difference between those superheroes of comic books and movies and Jesus is that Jesus actually lived and walked on the earth and did incredible things.

**Every miracle Jesus performs in the Gospel of John and in all the gospels begins with a problem** – there's family embarrassed to have run out of wine at a wedding, there's hungry crowd and not enough food to feed them, someone is blind or even dead. Every miracle begins with a problem. When you have a problem, this is a good thing to remember. You're in a better situation to experience a miracle. Problems can evoke a miracle. Problems can also reveal the presence, power, and new life that Christ can bring in challenging circumstances or even in the regular course of your life.

**The story of the wedding at Cana concludes by showing us two different ways of responding to Jesus – the steward and the disciples. The steward** in the story is perplexed by the sudden abundant appearance of such high-quality wine. He summons the bridegroom, the host of the party, because he assumes the wine can be explained by some conventional reason, like unprecedented hospitality or breaking with tradition. **Jesus' disciples** see in the miraculous abundance of good wine a sign of God's presence and glory among them. The steward tried to reshape the miracle to fit his categories of belief. The disciples allowed their categories of belief to be reshaped by Jesus' miracle and believed in Jesus as the revealer of God. In John's Gospel, there's no story of the transfiguration of Jesus on a mountain because God's glory is continually revealed in Jesus' life and ministry.

For John, the importance of the Cana wedding story is that this was **the first sign of Jesus that** revealed his glory and helped his disciples believe in him. I wonder about an untold part of the story. **What happened to the bride and groom?** We're never told their names. What a story they had to tell as the years passed! I hope they lived together for many years, never forgetting how they had glimpsed Jesus' true

identity as early as his closest and most respected disciples through the miracle he performed at their wedding.

Since Jesus was wildly extravagant in providing perhaps 150 gallons of wine, it's reasonable to think there was some wine leftover and hopefully if the couple went away for a brief honeymoon, a family member or friend poured the leftover wine into smaller containers to preserve it for the happy couple. Throughout the joys and heartaches of decades of married life – the birth of several children, likely the loss of a child, significant holidays, feasts, and anniversaries, the birth of their grandchildren – can you imagine the couple taking out some of the great wine that Jesus had made for them and celebrating and remembering.

In their old age and the twilight of their years, sitting by the fire some night, they eventually come to the end of the rabbi's wine. They slowly drink and savor the wine Jesus made and reminisce and tell stories of their life together. As they finish the final drops, he says, *"That's it,"* in a voice both satisfied and sad. *"All gone. None to pass on to the children and grandchildren now. Just the story of our wedding at Cana, and how Jesus blessed us abundantly, extravagantly with wine, how he turned our problem into a miracle. All that's left is the story."*

All that's left is the story of God's presence and power in their midst and how Jesus' glory is revealed in the wine that saved a wedding celebration and marked the coming of a new age. **Faith is the capacity to view experience from a particular perspective, it's not absolute certainty, or it wouldn't be faith.** To have faith is to be open to God's revelation in history, in our lives, even in our problems. Faith is a process of reassessment and growth.

The disciples believed in Jesus. What about you? What do you think about Jesus? How will you respond to him? Will you do whatever he tells you to do? Does his presence with you give you hope? Can you start with what you have, even in the midst a problem, trouble, or heartache even when what you have doesn't it seem like enough, and believe that God can bless you in ways you can't imagine? Do you believe that God can work miracles even in the midst of problems? Throughout the fourth gospel, John presents signs that reveal who Jesus is, hoping we'll progress spiritually from having an openness to faith, to a faith based on signs, to a mature faith that no longer needs

continual exposure to signs. As Jesus says to Thomas in John 20:29, *“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”*

The wedding story leads us to expect surprisingly good things to come as Jesus begins his ministry, and invites us to see what the disciples see, that in the abundance and graciousness of Jesus’ gift, one catches a glimpse of the identity and character of God. *“From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace”* (John 1:16).

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, when we’re empty, help us turn to you. Take our emptiness and fill it and transform it. May we do whatever you tells us to do, so that you can use us to fill the emptiness of others.

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. What are some of your favorite wedding memories? It could be your own, or that of a child, another family member or friend. What made that wedding special or memorable for you?
2. The sermon asserts that “every miracle begins with a problem.” In the Bible or in your own life, can you share a couple examples of this truth?
3. What does it mean to “start with what you have” in responding to situations that demand faith and in which we need God’s help or intervention? Where do you see that in John 2:1-11, and in other Bible stories? In your own life?
4. What cultural expectations surrounding hospitality are in the background of the story of the wedding at Cana in John 2:1-11, and what might that tell us about Jesus’ mission?
5. How do you feel about the challenging words of Jesus’ mother, “Do whatever he tells you.” In what ways is that phrase a motto for the Christian faith? What might Jesus be telling you to do at this time in your life?
6. Just like the empty stone jars stood waiting to be filled, how we are like empty vessels waiting to be filled by the new wine of Jesus? What might Jesus do in and with you if you make yourself fully available to him in faith?