
A Sign

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Second Sunday After The Epiphany – Year C**

*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. (John 2:1–2)*

They were invited to a wedding! What in the world were Jesus and his disciples doing, being invited to a wedding! And what in the world were they thinking, when they actually attended the wedding!

According to the second chapter of the Gospel of John, the new group had just gotten together. Jesus was gathering a team. These new disciples had left other teams to join Jesus! Apparently, some of them had been on John the Baptist's team first.

Something about Jesus had caused them to leave what they had, and to join up. Maybe they heard the world-changing words of Jesus. Some were looking for a messiah. Some were looking for the lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. Some were looking for the one on whom the Spirit would descend. Some were looking for a great rabbi. Some were looking for the fulfillment of Moses and the prophets. (All these titles are mentioned by John the gospel writer, right before today's story of the wedding.)

And, apparently, they had found what they were looking for. Their lives were being changed, and they were on their way as new disciples of Jesus.

And, then, one day, there was a wedding in Cana. How nice. In the midst of Roman occupation, in the midst of travails and struggles, someone decides to go ahead with a wedding.

Maybe it was a bit like our own times, today. In the midst of pandemic protocols, in the midst of social malaise and cultural anxiety, in the midst of people being sick, someone decides to go ahead and get married.

I have heard, these days, that some people are postponing weddings, postponing having children, postponing celebrations. "Let's wait," they say. "Let's wait for a more opportune time. Our time has not yet come." I understand those cautions. Maybe it is not yet the time to celebrate.

Fortunately, someone in Cana did not wait until an opportune time. Maybe it was the groom's family, or even the bride's family. Or the couple. Whomever. The time was now. Let's have the wedding. Even if times are tough, let's have the wedding. Let's invite people. Let's invite old Mary of Nazareth. Maybe her husband, too, what is his name?

Hey, let's invite that new young preacher, Jesus, too, the one who just came in from the Jordan River. He was just baptized out there by John the Baptizer; and this guy, Jesus, is assembling a new team, a new following of disciples. Let's invite him and all his new friends to the wedding, too.

The Bible does not say all this, of course. But it does say, curiously, Jesus and his disciples were invited to the wedding. I do not know why in the world Jesus, and his disciples, too, were invited to a wedding. But I find it very curious that they decided to accept the invitation and to attend. Weren't they supposed to be out getting their act together? Weren't they supposed to be out praying and studying scripture and healing? How in the world did they have time to attend a wedding?

But so they did. The mere fact that Jesus and his disciples attended a wedding as their first recorded act together in the Gospel of John, is worth something. For me, that is enough of a sign itself. It signifies that Jesus, and his disciples are real, that Jesus can be trusted.

As I said, times were hard. Certainly as hard as times are now. In the second chapter of John, times were so hard, that the unthinkable happens. It's a celebration, and they run out of wine. Were people already drinking too much? Did they not have enough wine to go around? Had they invited too many people? Were times that tough? What to do now?

Mary gives the news to Jesus. "They have no wine."

And the response from Jesus is a classic response from a young man who is trying to live into his own identity, a response to his own mother. "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me!" Except that translation does not quite get it right. The old King James Version translates the line more accurately: "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" "What have I got to do with you?"

Woman, what have I got to do with it. What have I got to do with you? My time has not yet come.

I have heard those lines recently. With all this caution and worry going around, what have I got to do with it? What have I got to do with things? What have I got to do with wearing masks? Why should I get vaccinated? What have I got to do with public health?

Or, What have I got to do with politics? What have I got to do with voting laws? What have I got to do with someone trying to secede from the city? What's that got to do with me?

I have my own life to live. I have my own family to nurture. I have my own team to assemble. I have a world to change. I can't be bothered with little things like running out of wine at a wedding.

But something happens.

I used to hear a famous story about the Pentecostal preacher and leader, David Du Plessis. He was quite popular in the days of the charismatic movement, full of the Spirit, and he got invited to all sorts of places. He, an outstanding Protestant, was even invited to Roman Catholic gatherings. They asked him, on that occasion, what are you doing in a church that seems to give so much reverence to Mary?

He said, simply, "Well, I admire Mary, too. I try to do what she says. And she pointed to Jesus at the wedding in Cana, and she said, simply, 'Do whatever he tells you.'" "Well," said David duPlessis, "that is what I try to do, too, whatever Jesus tells me."

Something happens. Mary says, "Do whatever he tells you." They did, and the water was turned to wine. And it seems to have been not just ordinary wine, but really, really good wine!

John, the gospel writer, says quite clearly that this was first of his signs. In his gospel, John will describe more signs of Jesus; there will be seven of them, in all. But the first sign occurs at a celebration.

What a great party guest Jesus turns out to be! According to John the gospel writer, his other signs include healing an official's son, and then healing a lame man, and then feeding a multitude, and then healing a man born blind. We know those stories as great miracles.

Except, the Gospel of John does not call them miracles. John's gospel calls them "signs." In the Bible, a sign is anything that points to God. And what we interpret as a miracle is, really, anything that is a sign of the grace and love and power of God.

Jesus came into the world to be a sign of God, to point to God, to give evidence of the power and love of God. The Gospel of John organizes itself around these signs, and the first one—the very first one—occurs at a wedding. The first sign of Jesus is at a celebration!

For sure, Jesus showed up in tragedy and crisis, during his time. Just as Jesus shows up in tragedy and crisis in our own time. Jesus is present with those who mourn. Jesus is present in the healing power of doctors and nurses. The signs of the presence of God are always with wonderful men and women who care, who show up to help. In Jesus' time, and in our own time, the signs of the presence of God will not be among those who are blaming; the signs of the presence of God will be among those who are responding—responding with love and care and wisdom.

Yes, Jesus is present in tragedy, and Jesus will always be present in tragedy.

But today's story is a sign that Jesus likes to be present at weddings, too, at times of rejoicing and merriment. Jesus shows signs of glory everywhere, healing the sick, assisting the poor. But, according to Saint John, Jesus performed his first sign, his first miracle, at a wedding – even if he considered, maybe for a moment, that he had nothing to do with it, nothing to do with celebrating.

Friends, do not ever be reluctant to celebrate. Do not be afraid to offer joy. Do not be embarrassed or sheepish about having to turn water into wine. According to Saint John, it was at a wedding, at a time of celebration, when the wine had run out, that was the first place in which Jesus revealed his glory. Celebrations turn water into wine! If you need to make something out of nothing, if you have some water that needs to be turned into wine in your life, find something to celebrate! Celebrations turn water into wine!

Okay. Maybe we are not there yet. Maybe, like Jesus, our time has not yet come. It's not time yet. And, in this particular season of the pandemic, still, our visits are safe and fully vaccinated! Maybe our time has not come YET! But in the Gospel of John: in the very next verse, the very next verse, Jesus acts!

Yes, even when times are tough: when someone invites you to a wedding, go to it! Go to the funeral. Go to the party. Go to the gathering. Go to the celebration. Find something to celebrate.

Has your time come? It will.

Has your time come? Of course it has! The time is now. And it will always be now.

AMEN.

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