



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Nudging the God of Abundance

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

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Ordinary 2 (Year C)

John 2:1-11

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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.

I've been part of enough weddings to know that something invariably happens that no one planned for. Perhaps there are no safety pins in the bride's dressing room—and trust me, someone from the bride's dressing room is always looking for a safety pin.

Maybe the flowers weren't right. Maybe the pastor fails to enter the sanctuary during the song that had been agreed upon. Maybe...I better stop there, because I know that there is at least one mother of a bride here today who is knee-deep in wedding details—and I know that wedding will come off without a hitch—which will make that wedding the exception, I'm sure. But trust me: Something always happens at a wedding that no one planned for.

Which is what makes this story from John's Gospel seem so familiar. A wedding has been planned, the guests have arrived, things are going according to plan—when slowly the news travels throughout the reception: they have run out of wine. I've been at

more than one wedding reception where such buzz made its way around the room: “They’re running low on those little meatballs in barbecue sauce. If you want one, you better go now!”

And so, at one level at least, this story seems familiar. But it doesn’t take long to discover that there’s something altogether different going on, and it will take our best thoughts to even begin to understand why—of all the things that Jesus did—this is the first one John chooses to tell us about. (This was the first sign.)

As this story marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in John’s Gospel, it makes some sense that John would tell a miracle story. But why this one? We may not always understand them, but we at least know how a typical miracle story is supposed to go: Some desperate human need is presented—whether someone is in need of healing or food or safety or has died—and Jesus responds by performing some extraordinary act that brings an end to the desperation.

But this miracle story is different. First, there is no desperate human need. They’ve just had the bad social misfortune of running out of wine. But there’s another difference: Jesus seems reluctant to act.

In noticing that, one commentator notes how this story holds up the scandal of divine reluctance. After all, when Mary tells Jesus that they’ve run out of wine, Jesus basically does nothing, saying, “What concern is that to me?”

I suspect Jesus sounded like so many in our culture today after Mary told him the problem: “So, what do I care?”

Obviously, there are some reasons Jesus may have been slow to respond. It could be that he knew that more wine for a wedding was not exactly the definition of desperate human need.

Or it could have been that he didn’t want to be seen as one who simply dispensed the goods and cash that people need. Surely the gospel-writer John knew how ridiculous and corrupting that thought would be.

Or it could simply be what Jesus says so often in John’s Gospel: His hour has not yet come.

And yet, no matter the reason, there is something in us that is scandalized by Jesus’ hesitation. And if his hesitation doesn’t bother us, perhaps we ought to wonder why.

You see, just as Mary saw her son Jesus as one who could—and should—meet needs, so do many other followers of Jesus. Even us, I suspect.

I like the way Carol Lakey Hess reflects on this. She writes: “We see a world in need, and we believe in one who claimed to bring abundant life to those in need. In a world where for so many there is no clean water—let alone fine wine—where is the extravagance of God?”

In a world where children play in bomb craters the size of thirty-gallon jugs, why the divine reluctance?

In a world where desperate mothers must say to their small children, “We have no

food,” why has the hour not yet come?”

“No matter,” she writes, “how we rationalize divine activity, we still want to tug at Jesus’ sleeve and say, “They have no wine.”

At the center of this text, here at the very beginning of John’s Gospel, is a sign, the first of many, that this Jesus is God’s very presence poured out upon the earth, giving life in abundance, like new wine. This is a story which highlights the extravagant care of God. As such, it only highlights the places and times where such extravagant care seems absent, where abundance has failed to show up. This story forces us to consider the question of how we can reconcile this story of overflowing generosity with a world of tremendous need.

I am thinking now of Haiti, where it is difficult to see any hope at all. Port au Prince is destroyed, thousands of people are dead, aid is slow in coming, the Red Cross estimates three and a half million are homeless, newly-orphaned children scream for their mothers. Violence is becoming a real possibility as the nation sinks into chaos. Yet right in the midst of this horror, across the street from a makeshift morgue thousands camped out in St. Pierre’s Plaza, singing hymns through the night. The lines from one of the hymns, translated from the Creole, “God, you are the one who gave me life. Why are we suffering?” In light of the text, you can almost hear Mary screaming to anyone who will listen, “God don’t you see they have no wine?”

But Mary isn’t the only one you can hear speaking. There are certainly voices out there that are saying all sorts of things, and I am thinking now of Pat Robertson. My friend Chris wrote something about this that I share with you now: “Robertson saw the earthquake and its aftermath and saw God’s presence in a completely different way. Rather than a God whose presence ennobles the people and causes them to sing, he saw a God who was present as a destroying cloud, a God who lost a contest with the Devil for the soul of Haiti in a kind of heavenly card game. It is hard to comprehend how anyone could rush to such a conclusion in the aftermath of such a catastrophe, and it would be easy for me to stand here and trash him for doing it. But frankly, his view on this is just a more radical version of a perspective we all share from time to time.

When tragedy strikes, whether it is writ large on a global and public stage, or writ small, inside the walls of our homes, or in the depths of our souls, we all of us want to try and make sense of it. And there are lots of ways to make sense of most anything that happens. We can choose to believe that people pretty much get what they deserve in this life and the next, we lie in the beds we make, and we reap what we sow. God is a Score-keeper in the sky, marking on our sheet when we’ve been naughty and when we’ve been nice, largely uninvolved except in this role as Judge. The Devil is the real power-broker, always trying to trip us up, and given full reign by God to do so. This is the theology that enables Pat Robertson to blame an earthquake on a pact with the devil; children suffering because of the supposed sins of their fathers.

And let’s be honest. It is a theology not confined only to Robertson and his ilk. Any

time you see an advertisement that says, subtly or directly, that you should buy this product because you “deserve” it; any time you hear someone say they picked themselves up by their own bootstraps; any time you and I find ourselves living our lives by the spreadsheet, keeping score; you better believe that theology is afoot. It is one way to look at the world, and there are lots of us doing it.”

Are you ever tempted to look at things that way? To think that God somehow needs our protection? If so, then let me offer you another way of looking at the need around us.

This troubling text invites us to trust so much in God’s generosity and abundance that we, like Mary—the mother of Jesus—nudge God with our observation: they have no wine. Instead of protecting God, it may be just the time for us to dare to nudge the God of abundance.

In a way, that’s what we do with the Food Pantry, as we see our neighbors in need and nudge God, saying, “They have no wine.”

That’s why we build houses with Habitat for Humanity and bring clothes for the Clothing Drive, because we’ve seen these needs and we dare to nudge the God of abundance, “They have no wine.”

In just a few months, we will hold our first-annual Massanutten Cares—a day of community service—and we are even now looking around our community for the places where there is desperate need—where people have no wine—and we are going there to be poured out in the name of Jesus.

We go to these places and we do these things for a simple reason, really. It’s simply this: As this was the first sign in John’s Gospel—of which there were many, the church is a sign as well. As the Great Ends of the Church puts it, we are an exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world—a sign of what God intends human life to be. And because of that, we will be at any place where there is human need, and we will nudge the God of abundance to take note of the places where “there is no wine,” that our abundant God might act.