

I

For a few semester breaks in college, I worked as a waiter and ballroom banquet server. During the summer months, it wasn't uncommon for me to be scheduled to work a wedding every Saturday, sometimes even two or three in the same weekend.

I've been in my share of wedding parties as a groomsman, and I've been the best man a time or two, and of course, as a pastor, one of the best parts of my job is presiding at wedding ceremonies.

II

As anyone who has been around weddings can tell you, despite all of the careful planning and coordination and our best efforts at attention to detail, there's always some hitch or glitch or hiccup at a wedding.

Most of the time, the glitch is so minor that only a handful of people ever know about it. And of course, sometimes the glitch ends up on YouTube.

But there's always at least one thing that doesn't go exactly to plan at a wedding. That's a truth that transcends boundaries of time, geography, and culture, and today's story from John's gospel is no exception.

III

When we come to our story this morning, Jesus, his mother, and his friends have all been invited to a wedding in the village of Cana, not far from Jesus' hometown of Nazareth in Galilee. Wedding customs vary over time and place, but you don't have to be Emily Post or Miss Manners to know that in every culture, weddings are social events that come with certain expectations about the roles of hosts and their guests. So while we may not know

all of the specifics of the wedding customs at this particular event, it's reasonable to assume that all of the ancient Middle Eastern practices and norms about hospitality offered to guests were being carefully observed.

So with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from John 2:1-11.

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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Did you catch the glitch? In the middle of the party, the bar ran out of wine. Not just the good stuff. Not just the cheap stuff. Everything. It's a major faux pas on the part of the host. It's a major violation of hospitality expected to be offered to wedding guests.

And so Jesus' mother sidles up to him and reports the glitch to him, to which Jesus replies, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

Now I will tell you that if I ever address my mother as anything other than "Mom," or "Ma'am," I will catch some serious side-eye or worse. I would never dare address her as "Woman."

But this is not a flippant response that Jesus is giving to his mother. Later in John's gospel, when Jesus hangs on the cross, he will say to his mother, "Woman, behold your son." Jesus' response isn't meant to read as flippant or rude. He's simply reporting to his mother that his hour, the time of his revelation and glory, has not yet come.

John doesn't tell us how his mother reacted to this statement. She simply turns to the banquet servers and says, "Do whatever he tells you."

Do whatever he tells you.

Standing there were six stone jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each with a capacity of 20 or 30 gallons. Imagine how much those stone jars must have weighed

empty.

But Jesus gives instructions that they are to be filled, not halfway, not most of the way, but up to the brim. If a pint is roughly a pound, imagine how heavy those jars are now. Do whatever he tells you, said Jesus' mother, and so they do exactly as Jesus says to do. Imagine the spillage dripping onto the ground as the banquet staff struggles with the incredibly heavy jars.

And when they are filled, Jesus tells them to draw some out and take it to the banquet manager. And as he tastes it, his eyes light up. This is wine where before there had been none. But not just any wine. Not just the cheap stuff that comes with a plastic cap or in a box - it's the good stuff, the expensive stuff, the stuff you only buy for very special occasions in very small quantities. But there are no small quantities here. There are gallons and gallons and gallons of delicious, rich wine.

What kind of host does that? Who offers such extravagant abundance, such extravagant generosity, such extravagant grace? The banquet manager is clearly impressed, and he publicly praises the host in front of the guests, and the day is saved.

But John then adds this little side note - Jesus did this, the first of his signs, while he was in Cana, and his disciples believed in him.

The first of his signs.

Signs are a big deal in John's gospel, and they are a big deal in our world, too. For example, there's a stop sign out there on

the corner. Even the smallest children know what a stop sign is and what it means. From the earliest age, we learn that a red octagon with white letters on it means STOP.

But it's not the sign itself that does the stopping. The sign is only effective when we see the sign, when we interpret it correctly, and we take appropriate action in response to it. Otherwise it's just some galvanized steel on an aluminum pole.

So this story isn't just about how Jesus saved the day at a wedding. It's a sign that points us to something more important to know about the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth. It's a sign that in Jesus, there is abundance. Not just a few drops. But gallons upon gallons upon gallons. It's a sign that in Jesus, there is goodness. It's a sign that in Jesus, there is life.

And did you notice who it was that first saw Jesus' sign of generosity and abundance?

It wasn't the bride or the groom or their parents. It wasn't even the banquet manager.

It was the kitchen help. It was the lowest, the least, the ones who the ones who were working whatever jobs they could find to make ends meet, the ones whose job it was to carry heavy stone jars and clean up spills.

They were the first ones to see the sign – the ones who were on the bottom of the social pecking order, the ones who were the least important people at the event

according to social custom. The ones who everyone else counted as last were the first ones to see the sign of God's extravagant, abundant, generous grace.

Jesus' mother said, "Do whatever he tells you to do," and they did exactly as he said, and there was wine where there had been none before. There was abundance where before there had been scarcity. There was joy where before there had been shame.

We will be reading and preaching our way through John's gospel this winter and spring, and this will be a theme that we continue as we read through John's gospel. Whenever people follow Jesus' instructions, there is abundance where before there had been scarcity. Whenever people read and follow the signs that Jesus gives them, there is hope where before there had been fear. Whenever people do whatever he tells them, there is new life where before there had been emptiness and pain.

IV

My wife Amy's grandmother used to have a refrigerator magnet that said "If at first you don't succeed, go back and do it like your mother told you." Maybe you and I need a magnet that says, "If at first you don't succeed, go back and do it like Jesus told you."

Because here's the truth, my friend. When I do life my way, sometimes it works, and sometimes it blows up in my face. But every time I follow Jesus instructions, every time I see and respond appropriately to the signs that Jesus puts in my life, whether it's in my approach to my career, my

relationship with my wife or my children, my relationship with others, with my personal finances, with my physical fitness, every time I do what he tells me, it works. Every. Single. Time.

Do you want to have better, deeper, more abundant and grace-filled relationships with your family and friends? Then do what he tells you.

Do you want to have more peace and contentment and joy in your life? Observe and respond to the signs that Jesus puts before you.

This story is about more than Jesus saving the day at a wedding, my friend. This story is about Jesus pointing you and me to the way of overflowing joy and extravagant generosity and so much grace and mercy and love that it spills and sloshes and splashes all over us.

V

I'm mindful that as we gather this morning, many of us are feeling like our collective tanks are just about empty. In many ways, it feels like not much has changed over the last year – the latest variant of the virus continues to upend so many aspects of our lives – the division and threats of violence that so plague our national life together seem to have only deepened rather than abated. And so our collective tanks of patience and mutual forbearance and fortitude have just about run dry.

And so I give thanks for the baptismal font that has been placed at the front and center of our worship life this

morning and filled to the brim.

For baptism is not just about a few drops of water. Baptism is a sign that points us to a larger truth – a truth about who and whose we are – namely that we belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to ourselves, but to our faithful savior Jesus Christ.

Our baptism is a sign that points us to the truth we have been claimed and marked, not just for salvation, but for service as well. Our baptism is a sign that we have been appointed to go into the world as Christ's ambassadors of hope, not just in here for an hour or two on Sunday mornings, but out there in the offices and in the classrooms and in the shops and stores and in all the places where people live and move and have their being.

Our baptism is a sign that points us to the truth that there is nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our collective tanks may be almost run out this morning. But an empty tank never stopped Jesus. He is the sign of God's presence with us, right in the middle of our messy, complicate lives. He is the one who turns water into wine. He is the one who turns shame into joy. He is the one who turns death into life.

Do whatever he tells you, says his mother.

May it be so for us this day, and every day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.