

A SERMON PREACHED AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH,
BETHANY BEACH, DE, ON JANUARY 20, 2019

A minister was called to a local nursing home to perform a wedding. An anxious old man met him at the door. The pastor sat down to counsel the old man and asked several questions. "Do you love her?" The old man replied, "I guess." "Is she a good Christian woman?" "I don't know for sure," the old man answered. "Does she have lots of money?" asked the pastor. "I doubt it." "Then why are you marrying her?" the preacher asked. "She can drive at night," the old man said.¹

As you might have guessed, we are at that portion of the *Gospel of John* that deals with the wedding feast at Cana. Anthony and I have studied and written about this text extensively in our book, *Cooking with the Bible*. Here's what Anthony has to say about the feast: "It is a dangerous task for the writer to attempt to comment on the wedding feast at Cana, as it is considered by many in the Christian tradition to exemplify the miracles of Jesus. Turning water into wine is not an everyday affair, and to our knowledge there are no recipes for doing so, neither in ancient cookbooks nor in the magical tomes of antiquity. Nor is there a lot of information in the Bible (or elsewhere) on matrimonial customs of the Galilean middle class in the 1st century. Perhaps the best we can do is to read between the lines and interpolate a scenario based upon later (and current) traditions in order to give us a fair idea of the type of feast Jesus and his disciples attended in Cana so long ago.

The festivities probably began on the third day of the week as was the prevailing custom, and continued for another four. Reclining guests (men) ate on floor mats, consuming lots of food and wine between listening to music and dancing. Women congregated elsewhere and were not part of the main activities of the celebration, remaining "behind the scene." Mary and other female relatives of Jesus were apparently present—which, one tradition suggests, indicates that the bride was probably a close relative. According to the same source, the customs for that time required that there be a feast of roasted lamb and herbs, bread, and a lot of wine, which was used both for drinking and in the preparation of the foods.

Just what other foods might have been at the myriad of tables set up for guests is uncertain. If it were a typical Palestinian wedding feast of the

era, some writers, such as the authors of *The Good Book Cookbook*, have speculated that the feast would also have included, at the very least, olives, sardines, grapevine leaves, millet, dried apricots, dates, almonds, raisins, duckling, pomegranates, and rice. Whatever was served, it was not in stingy portions.

When Jesus and his disciples arrive at the feast, it is apparently a few days into the celebration, as the wine is running short. This was a very serious matter; so Mary, who apparently had some role in the wedding celebration, approaches Jesus to see what can be done.³ Just how it is accomplished is a matter between theologians and the faithful, but the biblical story reports that the water is changed into wine. What is particularly noteworthy is the abundance of wine that is delivered as a result of Jesus' actions: 120 gallons! (Or more, if you consider that the Jews typically diluted their wine 7 parts [water] to 1 [wine]). The water into wine is really a most generous gesture and gift, which the early Christian Church came to interpret as a prototype of God's heavenly banquet reserved for believers.ⁱⁱ

A note about reciprocity:

"The law of reciprocity dictated how much food and wine were served. To provide a one-week feast exacted a tremendous toll upon the finances of the family hosting the festivities. One thing which helped them though was the realization that others hosting wedding festivities would reciprocate. Not to reciprocate in like manner would not only result in social embarrassment for the host but also in a lawsuit because he had failed to reciprocate appropriately." Therefore, when it appeared that there might not be enough wine to continue to serve the guests, there was a cause for great concern.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yet it was by this first of miraculous signs that Jesus revealed himself as the Son of God. And it was at Cana that his amazed disciples began to place their faith in him.

A few notes about Cana and the wedding feast held there. The exact location of Cana is still debated by Bible scholars. The name means "place of reeds." In the present day village of Kafr Cana in Israel stands the Greek

Orthodox church of St. George, built in 1886. In that church are two stone jars which locals claim are two of the jars used in Jesus' first miracle.

Several Bible translations, including the *King James Version* and *English Standard Version*, record Jesus addressing his mother as "woman," which some have characterized as brusque. The *New International Version* adds the adjective "dear" before woman.

Earlier in the *Gospel of John*, we are told that Jesus called Nathaniel, who was born in Cana, and "saw" Nathaniel sitting under a fig tree even before they met. The wedding couple's names are not mentioned, but because Cana was a small village, it's likely they had some connection to Nathaniel.

This miracle, showing Jesus' supernatural control over physical elements like water, marked the beginning of his public ministry. Like his other miracles, it benefited people in need. John referred to Jesus' miracles as "signs," indicators pointing to Jesus' divinity. Jesus' second sign, also performed in Cana, was the healing at a distance of a government official's son. In that miracle, the man believed through faith in Jesus *before* he saw the results, the attitude Jesus desired.

Some Bible scholars interpret the shortage of wine at Cana as symbolic of the spiritual dryness of Judaism at the time of Jesus. Wine was a common symbol of God's bounty and of spiritual joy.

Not only did Jesus produce a large quantity of wine, but the quality of it astonished the banquet master. In the same way, Jesus pours his Spirit into us in abundance, giving us God's best. While it may seem insignificant, there is crucial symbolism in this first miracle of Jesus. It was not a coincidence that the water Jesus transformed came from jars used for ceremonial washing. The water signified the Jewish system of purification, and Jesus replaced it with wine, representing his blood that was to wash away our impurities.

But what does the wedding feast mean, symbolically, liturgically, theologically? Peter Donis, of the Christian Churches of God, Australia,^{iv} writes “

Likewise, Christ, accompanied by his disciples, came to the wedding, where a covenant between a bride (equivalent to the Church) and the groom (comparable to Christ) was to take place. The town of Galilee is

used and referred to in such a way that it is capable of relating to us, as individuals and a church body. Galilee can come to mean more than just a place in Israel. Superimposed it can describe us, that is us as individuals and a church. We may construe Galilee to signify that: Christ came as a shining light, to Galilee of the Gentiles, those who once lived in darkness (Isa. 9:1). Christ came healing every disease and sickness among us (Mat. 4:23). We welcomed Christ into our hearts (John 4:45) and he uses us to reach others (Jn. 4:3,4). We have been given the spirit to teach all nations (Acts 2:7). Those who hear us will know we are His, in Christ, for we speak with a peculiar dialect (Mat. 26:73; Mk. 14:70), which is distinct from others. This world, undeniably picks us out, for we keep the commandments and testimony of Jesus Christ (Mat. 26:69). Christ is seen in us, after his resurrection (Mat. 26:32) Now that Christ lives in us, we the Church follow him and minister to him, so we may come up with him to spiritual Jerusalem (Mk. 15:41), the mother of us all (Gal. 4:26). These concepts are reflected in Christ's disciples. All of Messiah's disciples were Galileans, except one - Judas Iscariot (Mat. 4:18; Jn. 1:43-44; Acts 1:11; 2:7).

The text also tells us an important and obvious point. **“And the mother of Jesus was there.”**

Mary (which is incorrectly translated, is actually Mariam), as pointed out previously was most likely related by bloodline to the bridal party. Thus, no invitation was required. Her primary role would have been to assist in the hosting of the wedding, carrying out tasks and duties for the bridal party. She would have also instructed the servants what to do.

The gospel of John never refers to Jesus' mother as Mary. This is to draw out a distinction that we will see later. As we know, in the Bible a woman represents a church or nation (Rev. 12:4-6). In this account, we can interpret the mother of Jesus to represent the physical nation of ancient Israel and the Levitical priesthood through the seed of Abraham. (In other words, Mary was of the tribe of Israel, the tribe that served the temple. It is logical, therefore that her progeny and her relatives would have done so likewise.) The fact that she was already at the wedding by the time Jesus and his band of five disciples arrived is not surprising. It illustrates that she understood the Levitical priesthood that was participating in this Covenant of God. We should also consider that since the mother of Christ was part Levi, rendering assistance may symbolise, in this case, the sacrificial

system in which the priesthood took part during the first element of the covenant. (In other words, Mary was destined from Day One for her role in salvation just as Jesus came to symbolise the bridegroom of the Church. The question arises as to what she knew and when she knew it and passed the information on to her son. Perhaps these were the things she held in her heart while with the babe in the manger...)

What is clear from this portion of the story is that to be part of the wedding feast, one must be invited. It is God who does the choosing. Christ does not give the invitation so to speak. God draws the person, and gives them to Christ (Jn. 6:39). To speak to you about Christ's role as bridegroom would take another sermon and is probably not in keeping with Disciples theology and polity. Still, it's good to know how we got to where we've gotten so we know where we can move forward to! Can we see ourselves as Galileans, as family members, as disciples, as members of the bridal party, or as all these things? The answer will come in the lessons of the weeks ahead. All we need is the time, the willingness, and perhaps a good sense of humor.

As you are aware, it's hard to find good and appropriate humor for every occasion, though I must say wedding and marriage jokes abound. So instead of boring you with the history of weddings any further I'll leave you with a teaser that might allow you an entryway for the conversation this afternoon.

Did you hear about the two spiders who just got engaged? I hear they met on the web. (Say you heard it in church!).

Amen.

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ⁱ http://www.sarasotawedding.com/jokes/marriage_jokes.html

ⁱⁱ *Cooking with the Bible*, 190 .

ⁱⁱⁱ George Carey's *Bible Study Notes: Life of Christ: John 2:1-11* at <http://www.geocities.com/npford/loc18.html?20052>

^{iv} <http://www.ccg.org/weblibs/study-papers/p050.html>