

The Gospel of John, Part 4  
An Invitation to a Wedding

Would you go to a wedding with this man? [Icon of Jesus]. He looks kind of scary. Especially those eyes; they look as if they see everything! Do you feel safe with him?

It's still early in the Gospel of John. Jesus has barely begun gathering his team of disciples (last week it was Philip and Nathanael, the one who asked so skeptically, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"). But then today, at the beginning of Chapter Two, seemingly out of the blue, we have this wedding. In Nathanael's hometown of Cana. Jesus was invited. And so were the disciples. We're not even told who the bride and groom are. They're the most important people, right? Have you ever been to a wedding where the bride and groom weren't the most important people?

Why does John put this wedding near the beginning of his gospel? He tells us in verse 11. What happens at this wedding ends up being "the first of Jesus' signs," those "greater things" Jesus promised Nathanael he would see last week.

The Greek word for sign is σημεῖον. Which is usually translated as either miracle or sign. But here is the definition I like the best, for today, at least. A σημεῖον is something that "serves as a pointer to aid perception or insight."

Pointer. Like this? [picture of sign to Cana]. Here's an actual sign I saw when we visited Cana in January 2011. [image] It's a store that sells wine. Clever, right? And here is one of the trip leaders sampling the fare. [image] Anybody you recognize?

So what is this story in Chapter 2 a sign of? What does it point to? At least five things. Got your perception glasses on?

First, this story announces that there's going to be a party. It might be in the distant future; it might be soon. In the New Testament, weddings are often used in parables as "eschatological signs." Signs of the end time. That time when God's kingdom will at long last come in its fullness. Suffice it to say, it will be a time of great joy and celebration.

Let me ask you: what were your wedding parties like? Were you the center of attention? Of course you were! But remember that at today's wedding party it didn't even matter who the bride and groom are. Because they aren't the center of attention. I wonder who is.

Second, we're very likely going to be surprised by who all is invited to our eschatological party. For example, John tells us right off the bat that the mother of Jesus was at the wedding." What is she doing here? If you've been paying attention, you know that this is the very first time she's even been mentioned in John, and not even by name. There's no birth story, no "Mary's Magnificat," no angelic visitation, no shepherds or wise men like we have in Matthew and Luke. Just "the mother of Jesus" making a relatively innocuous appearance at the beginning of his adult ministry.

We could easily get the impression from this morning's story that the relationship between Jesus and his mother isn't particularly close. He doesn't address her with an affectionate title like "mother" or "mom." He calls her "woman." Which sounds dismissive,

even rude. And when his mother tells him that “they have no wine,” he responds as if he’s annoyed because she is meddling in his business. “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?”

I loved my mom. And I miss her terribly. But she could sure meddle in my business. For example, even as an adult she would try to tell me what clothes to wear. So I totally get Jesus being annoyed.

Except the commentators all agree that Jesus wasn’t annoyed. Moreover, he wasn’t even being rude or unkind. In the Gospel of John, the word “woman” was a neutral or even kind way of addressing, well, women. Including his mother. And when he says to her “what concern is that to you and me?” he’s not telling her to mind her own business and to stay out of his (as much as it might sound like it). It’s more like he’s looking out for her well being. Just like he does the only other time the mother of Jesus appears in John. Chapter 19, near the end. Jesus is on the cross, and he says to her very tenderly, “Woman, here is your son,” referring not to himself but to another disciple standing with her, and he said to him, “Here is your mother.” And John says that “from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.”

I look forward to seeing my mom in heaven, and don’t get me wrong, I won’t be surprised to see her there. I just suspect I’m going to be surprised by who all else I see there. I imagine you will too.

Third, we’re going to need an invitation to attend this party. But that’s not uncommon with weddings, right? Our oldest daughter Hillary and her fiancé Micah are having their wedding celebration this coming May. It will be at Goshen College, and more specifically, in the music building at Goshen College, since that after all was where they met and spent a lot of time together. Unfortunately, there won’t really be room for very many guests, at least as many as they might otherwise want to invite. As an attempt to alleviate this problem, they’re going to have two additional receptions, one in northern Michigan where Micah grew up, and one here in Kansas (in fact, here at this church). But even those extra receptions are going to have to be by invitation only. There is just simply a limit to how many people can be hosted and how much food can be provided by the families of the bride and groom. But to the party Jesus is hosting there apparently isn’t any limit. And anyway, we’ve already received our invitation. We might say that the Gospel of John is our invitation. And as John himself says repeatedly in his gospel, all we have to do is believe.

So what else is this story in Chapter 2 a sign of or pointer to? Fourth, coming at the beginning of the gospel, it signals or points to its end. When Jesus tells his mother “my hour has not yet come,” this is how Jesus in the Gospel of John Jesus about his end, namely the cross. The outpouring of wine in today’s story may be an indirect reference to the outpouring of his blood. But when we look beyond the cross what else do we see? What else is Jesus pointing to when he talks about his hour? His resurrection. The last and greatest of his signs in the Gospel of John, far greater than turning six stone jars of water into fine wine. We’re not there yet, the resurrection—both in his story, and in our own story. But we know it lies ahead. And here in Chapter Two John gives us a reminder.

Fifth and finally, this party that we’re all invited to will be an occasion of great extravagance and celebration. Do you want to know how we know this? Because John includes such details as the servants filling the water jars “up to the brim,” so we know there is as much

water in them as possible. And because 120 gallons of wine is a lot of wine! And don't forget that the guests had already consumed the wine originally provided.

It's important to be sensitive to those who have struggled and maybe still struggle with alcoholism. It is truly a devastating disease, to the victim and to their loved ones. But it's hard not to smile when the steward tells the bridegroom, "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." As if, at a celebrative, joyful party of this magnitude, it's okay to have a glass or two.

Bring on the wine, Jesus! And much more importantly, thanks for inviting me to your party!