

2 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and 2 Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the celebration. 3 When the wine ran out, Jesus' mother said to him, "They don't have any wine."

4 Jesus replied, "Woman, what does that have to do with me? My time hasn't come yet."

5 His mother told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." 6 Nearby were six stone water jars used for the Jewish cleansing ritual, each able to hold about twenty or thirty gallons.

7 Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water," and they filled them to the brim. 8 Then he told them, "Now draw some from them and take it to the headwaiter," and they did. 9 The headwaiter tasted the water that had become wine. He didn't know where it came from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew.

The headwaiter called the groom 10 and said, "Everyone serves the good wine first. They bring out the second-rate wine only when the guests are drinking freely. You kept the good wine until now." 11 This was the first miraculous sign that Jesus did in Cana of Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.  
(Common English Bible)

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When I was in seminary, every year for Mardi Gras we'd have a feast of fools. I don't remember what we ate— pancakes, probably. What I do remember was the hilarity that ensued as seminary colleagues and faculty performed comedic sketches, improvs, and the like. Now I'll admit that a lot of the humor was pretty specific to the context— probably not that hilarious to anyone not theologically nerdy. But the room was full of theological nerds so it worked. One particularly memorable skit involved four seminarians representing the four Gospel writers. It was inspired by a famous SNL bit, perhaps some of you remember it— the superfan sketch about "Da bears"? In our feast of fools sketch, the four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were negotiating amongst themselves about who would represent what about Jesus... when the matter of Jesus' divinity came up, Matthew, Mark, and Luke got a bit sheepish, but no worries, John had it covered "I got da divinity. I got da divinity. Don't worry about it!" Our Christmas Eve play reminded me of this fun scene.

We're going to be spending a lot of time with the Gospel of John up until Easter. And I suspect you may, at times, be surprised by the Jesus you meet in the pages of

*Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery*

this Gospel. We're all better acquainted with the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels, that's a theologically nerdy word for the other three— Synoptic is Greek for “to see together”— the other three clearly shared common sources and they are best read together. John is different from the other three in many respects, but most notably perhaps in its elevated understanding of Jesus. If you had only Mark's Gospel you could come away thinking Jesus was a great prophet who came to a tragic end, like so many prophets do. Matthew and Luke with their birth narratives and resurrection appearances may suggest that Jesus was not just a human prophet, but that something more was going on in and with him. But John... from the first chapter with that poetic prologue from which we read on the last Sunday of Advent and near the end of our Christmas Eve play— John proclaims that Jesus is the incarnation of the word of God, with God from all eternity, involved in the creation of all that is, that Jesus is the Word made flesh, God's own self in human form. Jesus is a revelation of God and God's glory— this is what the Gospel of John teaches. We heard that at the end of today's reading. John's got da divinity.

After hundreds of years of debates within the Christian church, debates fueled by the diversity of the Gospel witness and by the limits of human imagination and understanding, a council of the church gathered at Chalcedon, affirmed that Jesus is truly human, and truly divine, truly and fully human and divine, that he has two natures, both human and divine. This is a paradox that strains human reason, befuddles and confounds. But this is orthodox Christian teaching about the person of Jesus. When we look to Jesus we see both true humanity and true divinity— who we are ideally supposed to be, and who God is.

Some would suggest that a deficit of the Gospel of John is that it is harder to see Jesus' humanity in this Gospel. Jesus as truly God, sure. But truly human? This Word who was with God, who was God, who participated in the creation of the universe— sure maybe this Word took on flesh, but was this just a costume? Was Jesus truly human? I encourage you, as we read through this Gospel over the next several weeks to ask yourself— what does this reveal to me about Jesus? How is Jesus showing up in this Gospel?

Let's ask that of this week's story of the first sign of Jesus' earthly ministry, according to John. Now if you start at the end of the story, when you have seen the sign, when you know that Jesus turned water into wine.... Not just a bit of wine, and not mediocre wine, but A LOT of really, good wine, the best wine... If you start with this you'll say, well, there it is— John's got da divinity. Only God could do that.

But let's start where the story starts, shall we? The story starts with a situation of scarcity, the wine has run out. The story starts with Jesus' mother, never named in this Gospel, but present at key moments... reminding us that the word that took on flesh had a mother, got his flesh like we all get our flesh... And it starts with a word from Jesus' mother to him— “They don't have any wine.” Now there are so many tones that we could imagine this statement being made in. Hushed gossip/ judgement. Anxious concern. It appears that Jesus took it to have been delivered in a tone that assigned responsibility. Rather like when a mother says to a child, “There are clothes on the floor in your room.” The mother could say directly, “Would you please pick up the clothes on the floor in your room?” But in a household with clear expectations, an observational statement will convey the same message, right? And Jesus' response to his mother sounds to us rather like the response of a petulant teen. Of course, his response can be imagined in all sorts of tones as well... but... calling your mother “Woman” not necessarily rude, but odd, and then saying, “What does that have to do with me? My time hasn't come yet.” Because this is the response of a son to a mother— a mother who has simply made an observation to the son— it is easy to imagine it in the voice of a petulant teen, “Whatever, that's not my problem.” Can't you even see the eyes rolling?

Sure, this isn't the only way to imagine this bizarre exchange, but it seems plausible to me, and if we do imagine it this way we can see that John's got da humanity too. This seems like a very human interaction between a mother and a son. Let's go a bit farther. Jesus' mother is not deterred by his apparent rejection of her observation; mothers often aren't. She tells the servants to do whatever he tells them to do. And Jesus, like many sons, is prompted to action by the word of his mother, and he orders the servants to fill giant stone jars with gallons and gallons of water, and then to draw from the jars and take what they draw to the head waiter. And only

with the headwaiter's reaction do we discover that water is now wine, really, really good wine. And so Jesus' ministry begins in John, not with a sermon in a synagogue that nearly gets him thrown off a cliff, not with an exorcism, not with teaching and healing... but with a quiet word to servants, with a sign that points to God's intention to bring life, abundant life to humanity through him, with an act to keep a party going.

But let's go back again into that curious exchange between Jesus and his mother... Jesus seems to be hesitant to begin his public ministry, "it's not my time yet" he tells his mother. But she seems to think differently. Jesus is in a situation of scarcity and she has some sense that he can do something about that. It's time. Seeing Jesus as a son of a mother, means I see this exchange along the lines of the mother bird pushing the baby bird out of the nest to make it fly, or a human mother taking off the training wheels and letting go of the back of a bike, or human parents dropping their child at college and driving away... Jesus needs a nudge to begin the very hard work to which he has been called. And the situation of this wedding party, and his mother's decision to bring it to his awareness and ask others to pay attention to what he tells them, this provides the needed nudge. Yeah, it really seems like John's got da humanity too.

It is in this aspect of this first sign of Jesus' ministry according to John, that I think we can all find a way to relate to Jesus. We have all had moments when we knew there was work for us to do, usually work that would ultimately bring US great joy, but we were hesitant to take up that work. We doubted our own capacities, or our readiness; we feared consequences; we put it off for a more opportune time. Haven't you had that experience? Have you also had the experience of having someone in your life nudge you, maybe repeatedly, and invite others to welcome your work and service? I would not be a pastor were it not for lots of nudges from every church in which I participated as a youth and young adult, were it not for invitations to preach at an early age, invitations to serve starting in middle school, and friends and family who made simple, pointed observations at key moments.

I want to take the role of Jesus' mother for a moment, speaking to you, the embodiment of Jesus' ministry on earth right now, and make two simple, pointed observations. One, our nation's actions in Venezuela and on our own soil in relation

to immigrants, many of whom are of Latin descent, have been intense and frequently hostile. (Consider what happened in SE Portland just this week.) Two, we have been partnered, for over a decade, with a Cuban congregation. Both of these things are true. You may think none of this has anything to do with you. But please pray about that. Listen for gentle invitations and possibilities. Perhaps you can enjoy a lovely dinner party in the next month or two and know that you are helping to support your Cuban kindred in so doing. Perhaps you can bring loving support to those witnessing outside the ICE facility here in Portland. Or perhaps there's something else that rises to the surface of your imagination and stirs your heart. The possibilities, I'm sure, are many. I know the Spirit is active among you. There's no telling what fine vintage she will produce in this church!

Credits:

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