As we return to the Gospel of John, Jesus has recently taken a road trip from Bethany up to Galilee with several disciples. Chapter 2 begins, then, with a very specific story that takes place in Galilee, in the small village of Cana, just 9 miles from Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth (show map from last week). This story serves as the first of seven “signs” that Jesus performs, demonstrating His divinity and His identity. So, now that we know where we are, let’s stand and read what John records in John 2:1-12:

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. 3 When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” 4 And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” 5 His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” 6 Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. 8 And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it. 9 When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.” 11 This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him. 12 After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

My message will fall into three subheadings: 1) the problem; 2) the solution; and 3) the sign.

I. The problem

John begins the story by recalling that it was “the third day.” Last week we observed that John’s first four stories (beginning with John the Baptist in Bethany) took place on four consecutive days. Now, John states that this wedding took place on the third day. I think John is helping us to understand that the wedding took place three days after our last story…in other words, Jesus and his disciples left for Galilee on the fourth day of this week, they traveled all day on the fifth and perhaps the sixth, and on the third day of their travels (the seventh day of this week in the life of Christ), they arrive at a wedding in Cana. (Can we make a slide that briefly describes all 7 days?) Some commentators find significant meaning in John’s use of seven days in the life of Jesus as somehow mirroring the seven days of creation in Genesis. NT scholar Arthur Pink writes passionately regarding the significance of “the third day” referenced here by John as pointing back to the third day of creation, foreshadowing the resurrection on the third day and so on. I’m not sure we can know all the reasons that John keeps referring to “the next day” and here “the third day;” but, at a minimum, we should assume that we are hearing the testimony of an eye-witness. John remembers each one of these events because he was there, and that was a week that changed his life! Again, we do not find these kinds of details in ancient myths and legends…only in historical reportage. I do think there is significance in the seven days because John often draws upon the number seven! He recounts seven signs that Jesus performed; there are seven “I Am” statements that Jesus makes in John’s gospel; Jesus will refer to “his hour” seven times…so we should probably acknowledge that the first seven days recorded here in John’s gospel are intentional and significant.
As we return to vs. 1, John informs us that Jesus and his disciples are at a wedding-feast in the village of Cana in Galilee. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is at the wedding, and as we shall see, she is involved in the wedding as more than a spectator. When the wine runs out, it’s not just a problem, it is her problem and she makes it Jesus’ problem! This is why most commentators believe that this wedding likely involved someone from Jesus’ extended family or at least good friends of their family. John tells us in vs. 2 that Jesus has been invited and he has also been encouraged to bring his friends along with him, once again suggesting that this wedding involved people that Jesus knew from his childhood.

As is the case with most miracle stories involving Jesus, there is a problem, and we learn about the problem in vs. 3. “When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’”

Now, for some of you Presbyterians, running out of wine would actually qualify as a crisis in your home, but I can guarantee that your crisis would pale in comparison to the crisis that John describes here from the ancient world. To understand the problem, we must first understand the wedding feast within the context of ancient marital traditions.

In the ancient Jewish tradition, getting engaged and then married was a FAR bigger deal than it is in our modern culture. First of all, the betrothal period was very formal; it lasted for several months; and the engagement could only be broken by getting a divorce! The couple was literally, legally “married” when they became engaged (like Mary and Joseph in Luke’s gospel), but they did not live together nor were they to consummate their relationship sexually until after their wedding night. The actual wedding would begin after sundown on a Wednesday (for a virgin), when the groom and his friends would process with torches to the bride’s home. The groom and his attendants would then escort the bride and her attendants to the site of the wedding feast and ceremony. The actual wedding ceremony would come after the meal, and then the entire entourage would escort the couple back to their home, taking the longest route possible so that the whole village could wish them well, until they finally returned to the groom’s house where the couple would spend their first night together as husband and wife. In most cases, the groom’s house was a recently constructed addition to his father’s house. After the wedding night, the party would continue for several days, perhaps as long as a week! During that week, as the wedding party feasted, the bride and groom would wear crowns, and they would be referred to as “the king and queen,”…they would literally be treated like royalty. In a culture where there was great poverty and crushing needs, the occasion of a wedding feast was one of incredible joy and celebration! That is, as long as the wine did not run out.

(optional) I give you all of that information so that you will go home later and look at all of the “wedding” references that Jesus uses in all four gospels. For example, in John 14:1-3...a very famous passage, Jesus comforts his disciples about his pending departure, saying, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” That’s all “wedding language,” you heard that, right? Jesus regularly refers to Himself as the “Bridegroom,” and His church as “the Bride.” So...here in John 2, though we are reading about an actual wedding party that took place in an actual town, remember: this
whole story, particularly what Jesus does in the story, will serve as a sign...so keep that in mind as we return to the story.

In vs. 3 Mary presents the problem of “no wine” to her eldest, her firstborn, Jesus. I’ll get to the crisis of the wine in a minute. Let us acknowledge first, however, that Mary does not present the problem to her husband, Joseph. Would we not expect Mary to summon her husband to alert him of this problem? My wife does that all the time...she presents the problem of “the internet isn’t working” or “the car won’t start” to me because she is assuming that I, as her husband, will somehow jump in and solve the problem or at least join her in trying to solve the problem.

However, Joseph is apparently absent at this wedding, and given the importance of weddings in the ancient world, almost every commentator suggested that Joseph must have died prior to this event in Cana. Given that we never see Joseph after the story of Jesus when He was 12 in the temple recorded at the end of Luke 2, it’s quite likely that Joseph died while Jesus was still a teenager. That would explain Joseph’s absence in many stories where we see Mary without him. That would also explain why Jesus does not leave home and begin his public ministry until the age of 30 or so...He remained at home to help raise his brothers and sisters, and in so doing He took on the role of the leading man in their home. Such is likely the reason that Mary now comes to her firstborn with the problem, “They have no wine.”

Now...why was this such a big problem? It was the responsibility of the bridegroom and his family to ensure that there was plenty of wine and food to last throughout the feast as they honored the newlyweds. In a culture dominated by the value of hospitality, to run out of wine was a HUGE problem in this context. In fact, it was not unheard of for the bride’s family to sue the groom’s family for running out of wine. Why? Because both families would have been shamed and even ostracized from the community for such a failure to show sufficient hospitality on this occasion.

Mary knows that the family of the bridegroom is in serious trouble here. Such is why she turns to Jesus with the problem...surely Jesus will know what to do. We get the sense that Mary has turned to Jesus many times in the past, and He has never disappointed.

But this time, when Mary invokes the help of her firstborn, Jesus responds to her in an unusual way. In vs. 4 Jesus says, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” There’s a lot here, but I will try to cover it briefly.

First of all, Jesus refers to his mother as “gunai,” a term that served as a general and respectable means of referring to a woman in the ancient world. It would be equivalent to saying, “Ma’am” if you lived in the south, or “Madam” if you lived in England. The term is not forceful or disrespectful, but it is certainly surprising. We would rightly expect Jesus to respond to Mary using the term “mother;” but He doesn’t. NT scholars are in general agreement that something has changed since the last time Jesus was home with his family. We can likely assume that since Jesus was last in Galilee, he has been baptized by John the Baptist; he has endured 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan; and now, as He has begun to assemble His disciples, there is something new about Jesus that Mary has yet to grasp. Jesus “the firstborn of Mary and Joseph” is now Jesus, the Lamb of God…and likely for the first time, Jesus addresses Mary as her Lord.
rather than as her compliant son. And if that’s not awkward enough, Jesus then states, “τί ἐμοί καὶ σοί” which literally translates “What to me and to you?”

This phrase found several times in the OT is what scholars refer to as an idiomatic expression, not unlike the expression, “hold your tongue!” In other words, the expression has a meaning that is different than the literal words, and the people involved knew what the expression meant. When we tell a person to “hold your tongue,” we are not expecting him to grab his tongue with his fingers…we are telling the person to be quiet or to keep a secret! Such was the case here. The well-known idiomatic statement could really take on two meanings, depending on one’s tone of voice. When spoken as a complaint in anger or frustration, the phrase implied “What do you have against me?”…that is the meaning often found in stories like 1 Kings 17:18; Judges 11:13; and 2 Chronicles 35:21. However, when spoken with weary resignation, the phrase meant something akin to what we find in 2 Kings 3. In that story, the kings of Israel, Judah, and Edom are marching out to war, but on the seventh day they run out of water. So they ask the great prophet Elisha to inquire of the Lord about their water situation, to which Elisha responds, “τί emoi kai soi.” The expression reveals a reluctant prophet who has been summoned to meet a need that the prophet is not typically involved in or motivated to address. Thus, the ESV translation here in John 2 is pretty accurate, “What does this have to do with me?” Jesus then qualifies his response by stating, “My hour has not yet come.”

Jesus will refer to “his hour” seven times in John’s gospel, and “his hour” always refers to the time when man will have his way with Jesus…when the Lamb of God will submit to the whims of evil men, be tortured and then put to death. Until his hour has come, Jesus submits to no one other than the Father. Not even His earthly mother has authority over Jesus…just the Father. So, in essence Jesus tells His mother, “I will make no wine before my time!”

As awkward as this interchange has been for the reader, we don’t get the sense that Mary is offended or concerned about His response. Mary obviously knows that Jesus is no ordinary young man. She gets that He answers to God; she trusts Jesus to do what is right in this situation, even if that means doing nothing…which is why she instructs the servants in vs. 5, “Do whatever He tells you.”

Make no mistake: Jesus is in total control of the situation. He doesn’t HAVE to do anything…but Jesus, in concert with the Father, chooses to intercede for this young couple, and the way he intercedes points beyond the actual event and reveals His glory. So, what does Jesus do?

II. The Solution

In vs. 6 John remembers that “there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty to thirty gallons.” The Jews were very high on cleanliness both as a physical reality and a spiritual reality. So, before and during every meal, there was a lot of “purification” that was expected to happen. First, the Jews would wash their feet; then there was a very particular way that they would wash their hands (first holding their hands up and pouring the water down the hand; then holding their hands down, pouring the water on their hands after rubbing their palms with their fists). And they didn’t just wash before the meal, they washed between each course of the meal! When it came to the purification waters, families preferred
stone jars as opposed to the common earth-ware because the stone jars were cleaner and more resistant to mildew.

Seeing the six empty jars Jesus says to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And John reports, And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it. The text says they took the new wine to the “master of the feast.” The ἄρχιτρικλίνῳ was the “toastmaster”…probably a highly esteemed guest who acted as the “head of ceremonies” for this wedding feast. This man may have never known that there was a wine supply problem, but he does know something is up the minute he tastes the wine that Jesus has provided. John reports, “…the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

In the ancient wedding feast, the bridegroom would normally serve the choicest wine when people first arrived. Then, after the wine did it’s work and the people were “happy” and not so aware of what they were drinking, he would bring out the cheap wine. That makes sense, right? By the way, though the Jews LOVED wine and drank it often, they detested drunkenness. So, for the wedding feast and other such occasions, the wine would be significantly diluted so that people could drink and celebrate without getting drunk.

Imagine then what it was like to taste the wine made right there on the spot by the One whom through all things were made! I guarantee that wine was not diluted, but then it wasn’t made of fermented grapes either…it was willed into existence by the Son of God.

So…that’s how Jesus solved the wine problem, right? Where there was no wine, there is now 180 gallons of the best wine anyone has ever tasted! The party will go on, the guests will think much of the bridegroom who is serving the very best wine late in the week. The young couple will have a tremendous wine cellar for years to come, and everyone lives happily ever after, right?

But there’s more that happened here than meets the eye. John writes in vs. 11, “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.”

III. The Sign

So let us now consider what this story MEANS as we look to it as a SIGN. A sign always points beyond itself, so what does the story point to?

1) This story points to the fact that Jesus can be found in the midst of the simple and the poor. Jesus was active in Cana…a suburb just outside of nowhere! Jesus is not absent from the rich and the comfortable, but He is often hard to spot, and His presence is not always felt. However, should you walk through the slums of Nairobi, or dance with the orphaned children in Malawi…you will find Him there…always at work, turning water into wine…making much where there was nothing!
2) Note that there were six ceremonial purification jars. Arthur Pink notes that “six” was the number of “man,” and that 666 is the number of the beast according to the book of Revelation. Six was a number of incompleteness for the Jews, so Pink observes that the six empty jars for Jewish purification pointed to the empty, incomplete traditions of a people who always sought to be clean but could never accomplish what they longed for. They were a people “without wine;” symbolizing a people without joy since wine so often represented joy for the Jewish people. Psalm 104 credits the Lord as the one who brings forth wine to “gladden the hearts of men.” That is exactly what Jesus does through his shed blood on a cross…He gives us an abundance of His grace, it is His wine that gladdens the heart of men. In fact, he charged us to eat bread and drink wine in REMEMBRANCE of His body and blood so that we would be encouraged and grateful in our life together as believers, even as we anticipate the final wedding feast of the Lamb at the end of the age (Rev. 19), right?

3) When Jesus turns water from the purification jars into wine, it points to how Jesus accomplishes what religion could never accomplish. The overflowing jars of wine point to the end of Jewish purification practices. In fact, the disciples of Jesus will later be criticized because they stopped washing their hands like their obsessive-compulsive countrymen. Jesus accomplishes our purification once and for all on a Roman cross followed by an empty tomb! The old has gone, the new has come. Let us be careful then, not to pour the new wine of Jesus into the old wineskins of religious traditions. The wine that Jesus provides doesn’t fit old patterns of religious rites, nor should we attempt to make Jesus fit into any of our preconceived notions of religious appropriateness. Instead, we should seek to make ourselves fit into the roles of servants, those who “do whatever he says,” amen?

4) The Bridegroom who serves the best wine last points to a truth of Christianity: the best comes later. First there is work, then reward. “Those who endure to the end will be saved.” The “wine” of Jesus is worth the wait. This is never true when it comes to sin. Sin offers us immediate gratification; sin tells us we can have whatever we want whenever we want it; and sin makes us pay for it later.

5) The sign recorded here in John 2 indicates that Jesus, the Logos, is the Messiah of God. Contrary to Enlightenment theories and what is often referred to as “modern scholarship,” Jesus was not a mere ethical teacher or a misunderstood martyr. Clearly John understood Jesus to be the God/Man, one who lived within the limitations of a human life; yet one who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, accomplished signs and wonders. As John writes in vs. 11, “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.”

So…how does this story speak into your current circumstances? Are you lacking joy? Are you constantly obsessed about not having enough? Are you constantly trying to make yourself acceptable to God, but pretty sure you are always falling short? Let us then take a lesson from this sign performed by the Son of God.

1) Like Mary, present the problem to Jesus, and trust Him to do what is right and best according to God’s perfect judgments and plans for our lives. Don’t tell Jesus what to do, just present the problem and then…
2) Do whatever He says to do! Faith and obedience go hand in hand. Waiting on the Lord rarely involves doing nothing…waiting on the Lord means going as far as obedience will take you, knowing that God is ultimately responsible for the outcomes.

3) Join Jesus at the party! Jesus loves celebrations…Jesus loves marriages…Jesus is the source of our JOY! When we trust Jesus, when we trust Him for the source of our joy, we can count on a surplus! As the Psalmist writes, “You prepare a table before in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows!” The night may seem dark, but joy comes in the morning! If you still lack joy in your life, ask Jesus to turn your water into wine! Ask Him to change your heart, your attitudes, your perspective, and then give Him thanks every day.

4) Intercede for those who have run dry. I love the way that Mary made another person’s problem her problem, and she presented that problem to Jesus. Talk to Jesus about the plight of others. Don’t always talk about yourself (though most of us do!). Intercede for others and ask others to intercede for you. And then trust the Savior…He is good, all the time.

5) Finally, invite Jesus into your marriage! Jesus affirmed and confirmed God’s plan for marriage to be between a man and a woman, and he thought this marriage thing was worth a party with the very best wine in the world, and lots of it! If your marriage is lacking joy, invite Jesus to turn your water into wine…invite Him to leverage his power to solve the problem…and again, be prepared to do whatever He says, amen?

Church, if you invite Jesus into your home, into your marriage, into your workspace, into your school, into your friendships, into your pain, into your body, into your memories…He will do there what He has done here…He will transform absence into abundance; He will manifest His glory through your life; and you…along with so many others…will come to believe in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Invite Him…invite Him today and be prepared to tell your story of how Jesus turned your water into wine! Let’s pray.