

“Behind the Miracle”

John 2:1-10

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(Synopsis: The Wedding at Cana is more of a shame story than a miracle story)

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.

It’s good that you came to worship this morning because - by the end of the morning – everybody in this room will know how to turn water into wine. So please listen carefully.

I bring greetings today from the office of The Presbytery of Charlotte. I don’t bring greetings from “the Presbytery” but from the offices of the Presbytery where I work for you. *We* are the Presbytery of Charlotte.

Until recently, I was also one of the Co-Moderators of the Presbyterian Church USA and I was blessed to travel all over the United States and to several countries. And I learned quite a bit about myself with all that flying around.

Mostly I learned that - when I fly - I don’t like to talk to people. In fact I don’t want anyone to talk. I prefer to read or sleep, but on a cross Atlantic trip last year, I was sitting in front of two people who would not stop talking. They sat down as strangers and – believe me – I heard every word of their loud introduction to each other. I knew where they were from, what they did for work. Everything.

At first, it was annoying and then I realized that were flirting with each other and it became more interesting. Over the course of the flight, they shared their stories and she giggled at his jokes. They were clearly enamored with each other.

I could hardly wait to turn around and see what they looked like, so when the plane landed, I quickly caught a glimpse. And they were adorable, with goofy facial expressions, talking like they were old friends. They were holding hands and talking about hanging out together on this trip.

And my big regret that night was that I didn't hand them one of my business cards and say, "*I do weddings, if you're ever interested.*"

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As you can imagine - the practices and traditions of marriage today are different all over the world. And they were very different in First Century Palestine when Jesus attended a wedding in Cana. For example:

- There was no wedding ceremony, as we know it today. No "walking down the aisle." No vows made before family and friends.
- The marriage involved a legal contract between the father of the bride and the groom which spelled out payment to the bride's family and even to the bride in the case of wealthy families.
- Although Genesis teaches us that "a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife" actually it was the woman who left her father and mother and moved in with her in-laws.
- And it was **the groom's family** who threw the wedding reception.

... which is why the chief steward or headwaiter approached **the groom** about the wine instead of the bride's father in this story in John's gospel.

It was the **groom's** family who was responsible for entertaining the wedding guests. It was the **groom's** family who had run out of wine.

And *this*, my friends, was an unspeakable embarrassment. In fact, it was more than mere embarrassment. It was devastatingly shameful.

There's a difference between mere embarrassment and unspeakable shame:

- *It's embarrassing* if we spill wine on ourselves at dinner.
- *It's shameful* if we drink to the point of being totally out of control at an office party.
- *It's embarrassing* if we forget someone's birthday.
- *It can be shameful* if secretly we wish we had never been born.

In Ancient Palestine, the most shameful thing a person could do was refuse to offer proper hospitality. All through scripture, we see examples of God’s wrath upon those who refused to show hospitality to strangers as well as friends.

And this is still the case today in the Middle East. Generous hospitality is considered a requirement.

Several years ago, I visited a small village in Jordan called Smakia. The Jordanian Christians are among the oldest Christian communities in the world. There have been followers of Jesus living in Smakia since the resurrection.

Smakia is a very poor village and our group visited an elderly Christian woman whose home had been built on the site of an ancient church. In fact in the floor of her living room was a mosaic built in about 400 AD. She welcomed us in and seated us on the floor on a carpet that partially covered the mosaic. And shortly after we were seated – 12 of us – her grandson brought out small ice-cold glass bottles of Coca Cola.

Our Smakian host knew that we were from the United States and she’s heard that Americans really like Coca Cola and so she had somehow scraped together enough money for 12 bottles of Coke at about \$10 each – a huge sum of money for this woman. And she’d heard that Americans like our Coke to be ice-cold and she had somehow chilled our Coca Cola without any refrigeration.

She wasn’t doing this to show off or bribe us. She was offering lavish hospitality to her guests to make us feel at home because that’s what respectable people do.

Hospitality continues to be a crucial practice in the Middle East today and it is thoroughly shameful not to share hospitality with guests – whether they are strangers or friends. In fact **there are nine different words for “shame” in the New Testament.**

Two thousand years ago, on such a day as a wedding feast, it would have been indescribably disgraceful to run out of wine before the party was over. And so we have Jesus’ mother going to her son and perhaps whispering into his ear, “*They have no wine.*” At first Jesus seems to snap at his mother:

‘*Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.*’ But the term “woman” was actually a normal and polite way to address a female in those days.

And why did Mary go to Jesus with this news?

Because this was a woman who knew what it was like to be shamed at your own wedding.

- This was a woman who had been a mother before she’d been a wife.

- This was a woman who had been visited by an angel and told that her son would save people - and she believed it.
- This was a woman who knew what it was like to be shamed at your own wedding – but she also knew who could remove the shame.

Jesus had removed *her* shame and he could save the day at *this* wedding as well. And we know the rest of the story: Jesus provided fine wine out of water. And his disciples witnessed this and they believed in him.

I believe that Jesus still saves us from shame.

Every week in worship, we confess our sins – those destructive things we have done or those loving things we have failed to do. But there is a big difference between simple guilt and shame.

Guilt means “*I did something bad.*”
Shame means “*I am bad.*”

We all do things that separate us from God and each other: We forget what’s really important. We overlook those in need. We make the world about ourselves.

But there is also a deep-seated shame in each of us that only God can heal.

My husband Fred and I have three grown children: Ben, Jay, and Libby. When Ben was in Middle School we were picking him up from sports practice and there was a boy – we’ll call him Chris – who was still waiting for his ride, so we stuck around to wait with him.

We didn’t know Chris, but we waited with him and even asked if we could take him home. He said that someone would be coming to get him soon. It was starting to get dark and we suggested again that we give him a ride. But he said no.

When it became even darker and it was clear that nobody was coming to pick him up, I insisted and said, “Let’s get in the car. I’m happy to take you home.”

We could see as we drove up to his apartment building, that Chris lived in a rundown apartment building. Some of the windows on the first floor were boarded up or broken. We asked Ben to walk him to his door and Ben walked him into the building and took almost 20 minutes to return.

When he got back into the car, he said, “*Mom, “Chris” asked me not to tell anyone about where he lived. But can I tell you? I think he needs help.*”

And then Ben shared with us that Chris lived in a tiny apartment that was filled with magazines and boxes and trash. Ben had seen Chris' dad lying on the floor asleep but surrounded by bottles and cans. His mom was at the kitchen table and she looked sick.

Chris had begged Ben not to tell anyone about the way he lived. He was so ashamed.

I believe that all of us carry secrets and burdens that bring us shame:

- Shame that we didn't finish college. (Can you imagine being an adult living in Davidson, North Carolina and not having a college degree?)
- Shame that our children have not been as successful as somebody else's children.
- Shame that we can't afford to live the way our brothers and sisters live.
- Shame that we didn't go to war.
- Or shame that we did.
- Shame about a parent's alcoholism or a child's mental illness or a sibling's promiscuity.

Maybe some of us have even felt some shame about calling ourselves "*Christian*" when there are other people in the world who call themselves "*Christian*" who embarrass us. Some of us are ashamed because many of our Presbyterian congregations are a shadow of what they once were.

But the life-changing news is that Jesus is available to save us from our shame. We were created by a God who would turn water into wine before he would allow a bridegroom to be shamed at his wedding.

And if we are serious about following Jesus, we need to follow this practice. Maybe we can't turn water into wine. But we can offer the grace to others that makes their shame melt away.

Instead of telling the other kids how Chris lived, Ben kept that information to himself. And he looked out for Chris in the future.

I heard another story recently about a teenager - let's call her Maddie - whose mother earned money by dancing at adult parties. Maddie was mortified.

Other people's moms were teachers or bankers or florists. But her mom paid the family bills by entertaining grown-ups at parties. Maddie lived in terror of people finding out.

Maddie created lies about what her mom did for a living in hopes that nobody would ask many questions. Sometimes she told people her mom was a secretary. Other times, she told people her mom was a nurse in a distant hospital.

She hid flyers that her mom brought home from work, afraid that one of her friends would see them lying on the kitchen table.

But one day, a group of kids from school came over to work on a science project together. Maddie had checked to be sure that all signs of mom's job had been hidden or thrown away. Mom was going to be at work for a long shift, so Maddie didn't have to worry about her Mom coming in and letting it slip where she worked.

But as the students were sitting at the kitchen table, working on their project, one of the kids noticed a calendar on the bulletin board with a picture of Maddie's mom wearing some sort of feathered outfit. And he said, "*Hey, Maddie, isn't that your mom?*"

There it was. The moment Maddie had prayed would never happen. The moment she had dreaded for years. What could she say? Actually there was such a lump in her throat that she couldn't say much of anything. And she felt like she was going to cry.

The other kids' weren't paying much attention, but the boy who had seen the calendar noticed immediately that Maddie was mortified.

And then he said words that turned water into wine: "*Your Mom must really love you.*" And before the other kids could notice, he quietly stood up and took the calendar down from the bulletin board and placed something on top of it.

Maddie had been saved.

There it is: There is a miracle behind the miracle of Jesus turning water into fine wine.

- It's the miracle of offering grace with no strings attached.
- It's the miracle of helping a friend – or even a stranger – save face.
- It's the miracle of sparing someone shame.

This is – sadly – not the way of many of our political and government leaders who seeks to humiliate and shame their rivals.

But this is the message of Jesus who died a most shameful death with seemingly no one there to save him.

This was Jesus' calling and this is our calling too if we intend to follow him. We can offer miracles behind the scenes in his honor and to his glory.

There are three final things I'd like to leave with you, because God has given me this great privilege of being your preacher this morning. I share this with all love and hope:

- This church is not about you. It's not about your pastor or me or the PCUSA. **This church is about the message of Jesus and how you can share that message.**
- This is a good day to remember **to pray for your next called Head of Staff** - and for your Associate Pastors and your Transitional Pastor - as we continue into this new year.
- And finally, this church exists to show Davidson *what love looks like*, to the glory of God. We are not here to please ourselves. We are not here to be surrounded by our favorite sights and sounds. We are here to turn water into wine for this community and the world.

May it be so in the name of the One who is with us still. Amen.