

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Weddings are very important occasions, and all involved want the event to go off without a hitch – and that’s one reason why a wedding rehearsal is often scheduled.

Still, as one who has been the officiant at many rehearsals and many weddings, I could tell you many stories of weddings gone awry –

Fortunately, though, I could tell you far more stories of wedding misfortunes avoided, thanks to conscientious planning and double-checking the details. Do some people actually forget their wedding rings, or their marriage license? Yes, indeed, some people do.

I’m talking about this because a wedding “blunder” is the subject of today’s Gospel reading; it’s what happened at the wedding in Cana that Jesus, his mother, and his disciples attended.

At the wedding party, the wine ran out. Somebody had made a mistake. Either too many people had been invited, or too little wine had been purchased, or both, but for whatever the reason, the couple faced an embarrassing situation.

At that point, mother Mary turned to her son, Jesus, and asked him to do something about this. That might strike us as somewhat surprising that Mary takes the initiative here, for it is not her problem; it wasn’t her child who was being married. But apparently she was more than just another guest.

One of the non-canonical gospels from the Coptic Christian tradition reports that Mary was a sister of the groom’s mother. If that was the case, then it makes perfect sense that she would try to help out.

And what she does is turn to Jesus and ask him to do something. That, of course, indicates that she believed that he could do something about it. In fact, without even waiting for Jesus to agree, she turns to the servants at the wedding and says, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Certainly Mary knew her son was no ordinary person. Jesus’ conception was announced to her by an angel and she had been told that her child would be the Son of God.

We don’t know, of course, what actually transpired in Mary’s household, as Jesus was growing up, that further convinced her that her son possessed unique abilities. But surely there were enough things that led her to expect that Jesus could help this couple out of their wine shortage problem.

None of this, however, explains why John chose to include this miracle story in his gospel.

That Jesus turned water into wine at this marriage feast seems, at first reading, simply to be a miracle story demonstrating that Jesus really did have special power.

But there's got to be more to it than that, for unlike the other gospel writers, John tells only seven miracle stories, and he appears to have picked them very carefully. And rather than calling them miracles, John calls them "signs," a word that stresses the spiritual significance of the miracles.

And John even tells us that he records these signs so that readers of his gospel might believe that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God (John 20:31). So there must be some spiritual significance to this miracle.

The problem is, to readers unfamiliar with the customs of first-century Judaism, the spiritual significance of this miracle is not immediately obvious.

After all, compared to miracles Jesus performed later, where the blind receive their sight, people with incurable diseases are healed, multitudes are fed, or the dead are raised, this miracle seems to accomplish far less. Basically, all it does is save the party hosts from a socially awkward situation.

John does tell us of one other result of this wine-producing phenomenon, and that is that it made a big impression on Jesus' disciples, who were also present. John reports that "his disciples believed in him."

But they must have already believed in him to some degree, or they wouldn't have been following him. So that can't be the only reason John decided to tell of this miracle.

Consider this: John relates this incident using his excellent storytelling skills, and like any good storyteller, he builds the story to a kind of "ah-ha" moment, to a statement that really brings home the point he intends to make.

The statement comes from the mouth of the chief steward, the marriage feast supervisor whose responsibility it is to make sure the guests are properly taken care of and served.

After Jesus has the servants fill the six large stone jars with water, he tells them to then draw some out, and take it to the chief steward, presumably so he can approve it before it is served to the guests.

He tastes it, and with surprise says, "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" (John 2:10).

On the surface, this might seem as merely a way of saying that Jesus performs really good miracles, but I believe John told this story for another reason. And I'll tell you what that is, but first here are a couple of things helpful to know:

In ancient Jewish thought, the coming of the kingdom of God was sometimes portrayed as a great wedding feast. Also, an abundance of wine sometimes symbolized great joy.

Consider this example from the book of the Old Testament prophet, Amos, referring to the day of the Lord: “The time is surely coming, says the LORD, when ... the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it” (Amos 9:13).

John, I believe, is telling us that just as the wine Jesus created was superior to the previously served wine, so the provision for our salvation that came with Jesus’ entry into our world is superior to the previous provision for salvation under the Mosaic law.

In fact, John says precisely this in the first chapter of his Gospel: “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

So in telling this story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding feast, John is not only reporting an actual event from the life of Jesus, but he is also using it to convey that God has done a great thing in sending Jesus to us, and that it is an occasion for great joy.

You know, of course, that just as in biblical times, wine is often associated today with joyous occasions –

weddings, dinner with friends, fine meals, and even vacations expressly for the purpose of visiting regions of the country where wine is made. Connoisseurs of wine speak of the pleasure that comes from the look, the smell, and the taste of fine wine.

But of course, my purpose here is not to promote wine use but to recognize the symbolism in this miracle story, and to understand that John is telling us that in Jesus, a great gift has been given to humankind, and that it is an occasion for great joy.

Joy – have you recognized that one of the great blessings of following Jesus is joy? Perhaps we don’t talk about that enough. G. K. Chesterton wrote that joy is “the gigantic secret of a Christian.”

I think what he meant by that is that we sometimes emphasize the things that Christians should not do, the behaviors we should avoid, the “you shall nots,” to the point that we forget to tell people that following Jesus is a path of great joy.

Joy is something different from happiness, which is often momentary. Joy is the buoyant undercurrent of Christianity, like the song a couple chooses for their first dance at a wedding party.

Joy is the reason some of the early Christians went off to their deaths as martyrs, raising their voices in songs, and with great rejoicing.

And joy is the reason Christians down through the ages have clung to their faith through great troubles.

The Christian faith deals seriously with issues of right and wrong, good and evil, pain, death and suffering. But it does so out of a sense of ultimate hope, and out of a great confidence that God is the final victor, and that his kingdom will one day come in all its fullness. So the trademark of the Christian faith is not gloom, but joy.

John intends this story from the life of Jesus to tell us far more than that Jesus had the ability to work miracles. He wants us to know that, in Jesus, the greatest and best means of salvation has come, and that this is the root of real and genuine joy.

Salvation is all about the fullness of life, a joy that is symbolized biblically, for us today, by the abundance of wine, more than enough to last for the rest of our party here on this earth. And to that I say, “Thanks be to God!” Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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