

John 2:1-11

A Storytelling Commentary on John 2:1-11

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The story this week is the wedding at Cana. It's a story from the fragmented Gospel of John for Epiphany. Just a comment about this in relation to the lectionary: the lectionary fractures the Gospel of John so that we never hear the whole story. That is most unfortunate in relation to our understanding of the Gospel of John. So whenever possible, I would recommend that you tell as much of the Gospel of John in sequence, as much as can be managed in one worship service. In this case, tell the whole of the story of the wedding at Cana.

The dynamic of the story is that his changing water into wine is a sign of Jesus' power and authority. But it is first of all based on Jewish humor. There are two Jewish jokes that are foundational to the early parts of John. The first is the repartee between Jesus and Nathaniel in which Jesus says in effect, "Hey look at this, a true Israelite in whom there is no guile (no trickery)" in contrast to the father of Israelites, namely, Israel, otherwise known as Jacob, who was known for tricking his brother and his father-in-law. Nathaniel responds, "How did you know me?" and Jesus answers, "I saw you standing over by the fig tree." Nathaniel goes nuts with his response, "You are the Son of God, the King of Israel!" The humor in the Nathaniel story is based on the common joke about the forefather of all Israelites.

The story of the wedding at Cana involves a Jewish mother joke. You know the Jewish mother joke: "How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb?" None – "It's alright. It's alright. I'll just sit here in the dark." The introduction of this story has that same feel to it.

The intention of the introduction of this story is for the listeners to smile and to recognize a relationship between a Jewish mother and son that has the kind of repartee that was beloved in the community. Jesus' words to his mother and her responses are on the one hand humorous. On the other hand, this is his first passion prophecy and reference to the final miracle of his death and resurrection, the hour when he would be glorified. As he says to Philip and Andrew later in the story, "My hour has come, now is the time when the Son of Man will be glorified." In this instance, his hour has not yet come.

When the servants fill the water jars, which were for the rites of purification, they are following Jesus' instructions. The rites of purification were for various things for both men and women; for men after nocturnal emissions, for women after a menstrual period, for various kinds of impurities that would be contracted by touching an unclean animal or a corpse, for uncleanness that was contracted by foods that were unclean. These water jars were very large in order to provide the resources of water for ritual baths. It is implied that each of them held two or three metratas, 18-24 gallons. So in the six jars there was approximately 120 gallons of water. So this is a major wine-manufacturing miracle that Jesus performs.

The sign of turning water into wine is a miracle associated with Dionysius in the ancient world. In Euripides' play, *The Bacchae*, which predates the stories of the Gospels by several centuries, Dionysius turns water into wine. In about the same period as John, Philo interprets Melchizadek as the Logos who transforms water into wine. Thus there are both Jewish and pagan precedents for this miracle story. Jesus' parable of the wine and wine skins in Mark 2:22 is another example of a new wine motif in the gospel

tradition. This action is a manifestation of Jesus' power. In effect, Jesus supersedes Dionysius as a representative of divine power that is greater than that of Dionysus.

This story is delightful and I recommend that you tell it in the spirit of a wedding. It is a joyful story that invites both wonder and surprise at who Jesus is, and also simply delight at his providing all this wine for a great wedding reception. In some ways it is a more secular story than any of the stories of the gospel tradition. It makes it clear that Jesus is one who is greater than the gods of the Hellenistic world.

The location in Cana is congruent with the Gospels as the place of Jesus' first acts of ministry. The purpose of these sign stories in John is to invite faith on the part of the listeners. That is reflected at the end of the story when the disciples believed in him. The audience is invited to join the disciples in believing in him. Another motif at the end of the story is that the disciples here recognize in this sign his glory, that is, his being a sign of the presence of God. Thus, this story is an invitation to enter into the spirit of epiphany, of the experiences of Jesus as a sign of the presence of God in the world.