

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Online Bible Study Starter

**John 2:1-11 — Jesus at a Wedding in Cana of Galilee**

What we might call a miracle, the Gospel of John calls a sign: “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” (verse 11, NRSV) So, the question becomes, “A sign of what, pointing us toward what?” Clearly, the desired response to a sign from Jesus is faith in him, although the gospel will continue to develop the nature and content of that faith. At the conclusion of John we read, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30,31 NRSV)

I think of this Cana story within the context of Jesus’ declaration in John 10, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Wine is a symbol of life (and, because it can represent blood, also sometimes of both life and the outpouring of life in death).

Here a normal celebration of life, a wedding, is infused with the new life given by the one God has sent to give life, if only symbolically at this point. Jesus turns the water for ritual purification into the wine of new life, and we are told it is superior wine — abundant life. The emphasis is not placed on Jesus’ ability to perform the miracle but on the purpose of his coming.

But I chose this reading for our discussion because of verse 4. Jesus’ mother has told him the wine has run out. We read, as NRSV translates it, “And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’”

Much has been written, speculated, and argued about Jesus’ addressing his mother as “woman,” with some questioning the quality of the relationship while others have defended it and even over-defended it. In John, Jesus address his mother again as “woman” when she stands before his cross, and he commends her to the beloved disciple and him to her: “Woman, behold your son; son your mother.” He also calls Mary Magdalene “woman” when he appears to her in the garden after his resurrection. So, I would not make much of it as far as speculating about the nature or quality of the mother-son relationship.

Jesus’ “hour” which has not yet come is the time for his “glorification,” by which John means crucifixion, resurrection, and return to the Father. The time for signs is only just beginning, and people will be challenged to believe in him; it is not time for him to provide wine — to pour out his blood.

What I want to point out in verse 4, however, is the Semitic expression Jesus uses to ask his mother why she has come to him with this matter. Literally, it is, “What to you and to me?” What does this problem or concern have to do with us, based upon the relationship we have with each other?

The Israelites had a very relational view of life, and the Hebrew language reflects this way of seeing things. The Gospel of John is written in Greek, not Hebrew, and Jesus himself spoke Aramaic which is another Semitic language. Hebrew had by that time passed into being a sacred language rather than an everyday one. But the expression is a Semitism, and I like it. In fact, I think of it fairly often, especially when someone asks me to do something that feels awkward or seems inappropriate. Should I do this thing I have been asked to do? Why? What relationship do the other person and I have with each other and together with the matter at hand? What is our relation to each other in terms of this problem?

The word translated “righteousness” in the Old Testament is a strongly relational term, not a legalistic or objective one. The concept is based on relationships between people, not on standards or norms to be applied dispassionately to everyone in every situation. An act is righteous if it is done in good faith in a way appropriate to the relationship or agreement which exists between the two parties and the matter at hand. So it is that Abram’s believing God’s seemingly impossible promise of a son and, from that son, a multitude of heirs, is counted as righteousness (Genesis 15:6) because Yahweh (the LORD) is his God and is to be believed and trusted, even though the man cannot see how the promise can possibly be kept. It is not for the man to know better than God or limit his hopes to the boundaries of his own understanding; it is for the man to trust his God and to obey in trust. That trust, in this situation, given this relationship between Abram and God, is righteousness.

When we looked at Micah 6:1-8, we saw that Yahweh’s complaint against Israel was based, not on particular laws that Israel had broken, but on the deterioration of the covenant relationship. Yahweh’s covenant partner, Israel, would not respond to love and kindness but would only offer sacrifices to appease God. The God who loves us does not want to be appeased or mollified, then dismissed from our concerns. Go to church on Sunday to satisfy the requirement, and then forget God the rest of the week? No, that’s insulting when the relationship is considered.

The Hebrew word for “true” is also relational. It is *aman*, from which comes the declaration, “amen,” which does not mean simply that what has been said is true but that I acknowledge it as true to and for me and I take that truth to myself, affirming it as truth for me. The idea is relational not merely factual or propositional: it is not true merely in the sense that the statement “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” is true, but in the way that the joyous declaration, “God is good!” is true for the person who has experienced God’s grace and is thankful.

One form of *aman* is normally used in the Bible only of God who is true, reliable, faithful, and trustworthy without question; normally, the word is used of human beings only in the negative — people are not true in their dealings with each other, are not trustworthy without question. There is, however, a foreman in the building of Solomon’s temple who is described by this word because he can be trusted to pay his workers fairly and on time without needing anyone to check up on him. This idea takes us back to the Bible’s concept of righteousness. As a foreman, this man is true and righteous in relation to his supervisors and his workers.

What to you and to me? What does our relationship with each other say it is right for me to do for you or in relation to you? What are the limits? What is it wrong for me to try to require of you or for you to ask of me? This kind of thinking personalizes life. Behavior is not a matter of rules, regulations, and norms but, rather, of relationships and personalized responsibilities.

So it is that Yahweh God wants Abram (later renamed Abraham) to obey in trust, not fear. So it is that Jesus questions the motives of our praying, giving charity, and fasting. Samuel (when he is looking for the right son of Jesse to anoint as the next king) is told humans look upon appearances but God sees the heart (which is mainly the will in biblical thinking). With God, my actions are not righteous if they hold to the rule, the letter, or the fine print at the bottom of the page, but violate the person and the relationship.

Jesus makes it clear (as does God in the Old Testament, too) that our relations with people are to be guided by our relationship with him. “As you have done it to one of the least of these, my sister, my brother, you have done it to me.” So, the question, “What to you and to me?” now includes him.

Questions for discussion:

1. What do we mean when we call someone a “true friend”? How is that use of the word “true” different from other ways we use it?
2. How important are limits or boundaries in human relations and relationships? Doesn't Jesus' question acknowledge the importance of boundaries? And don't his mercy and compassion show the importance of transcending them sometimes?
3. Jesus came to give life and give it in abundance, symbolized in John 2 by a great abundance of very good wine. Psalm 23 uses the same image: “My cup overflows.” How might we enhance our understanding and application of some of our eight vision directions by thinking of God's desire to give abundant life?
4. How is life depersonalized these days? Where and how is life being personalized, humanized, and made truer between people? Does the church have a role in personalizing life?
5. What connections do you see between depersonalizing life and dehumanizing people?
6. Have you noticed how much more strongly people respond to problems or situations of distress when they see the faces of real people suffering from them? What are we, as followers of Jesus, called to “put a face on” for people in our communities and our world? How might we do so?
7. How can we as a church bring new life to the routine and the ritualized (water for ritual purification)? Does this question connect at all with the one we've discussed about motivation within a faith community that seeks to live by grace rather than by performance and evaluation under rules and standards? Without guilt and fear, what motivates us?