

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“Empty Enough”

John 2: 1-11

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Ever been to one of those parties that you just didn't want to leave? You were having so much fun, you were just like Cinderella at the ball, wishing it would go on forever? We don't get to party that way often.

A couple of years ago, Julie and I went back to Houston to be a part of the wedding of one of the kids we'd watch grow up in our youth group. She was about 30... but we'd first known her when she had her first pimples. Now she was walking the aisle... marrying maturely. The ceremony was beautiful and powerful... and the party afterwards... it was absolutely amazing.

It was at the Petroleum club in downtown Houston at the top of the Exxon building. So you're looking out over the city.

And there's this wonderful buffet...

Wine and Champaign flowing everywhere...

And a band that could play anything.

The room was filled with old friend who hadn't seen one another in years. Lots of folks, now grown up, that we'd hauled to camp and to ski resorts and on mission trips when they were teenagers. And all their parents are there... and former youth workers. It was wonderful.

We were eating and dancing... group pictures were being taken here and there. The bride and groom were having a blast.

Julie and I thought we'd just make an appearance and then hit the road so we could get some sleep before Sunday but we stayed... and stayed as long as they kept the doors open.

We don't get to party like that too very often. It Jesus' day it was even more rare. So when John begins to tell about his ministry and he starts it at a wedding, well... it's a sort of fun way to begin the story, especially in that culture.

Most folks led simple lives... bread and cheap wine... cheap fish... an olive here or there. A few nuts on the table if the week had been good. But when someone in the community got married... everyone... everyone got to party.

Hospitality was a sacred duty in the ancient Middle East and not having a great feast for a wedding would be a terrible shame. We have nothing akin to it so just imagine the rudest thing there is in our culture.

Someone visits your home and your invitation... but you prepare no food for them. You don't fix them a bed to sleep in.

You're a student in a class... listening to the lecture when your cell phone goes off. It's your good friend from back home and the two of you talk for five minutes while the professor is trying to lecture.

Your parent passes away and you don't show up at the funeral because you had a hair appointment.

Hospitality... i.e. providing a party for the town when the kids get married... was a sacred obligation. Everyone does it... the whole town awaits it.

They'd been eating baloney sandwiches for a year... day after day but then the invitation came.

*We humbly request the honor of your presence
To witness our children's vows wedding vows
and feast with them afterwards at the Cannan Club.*

You put that one on the fridge.

Maybe make a new outfit...

or buy one of those fancy Persian ones from the Galilean Gap...

or maybe even from Herods.

All the guys would get a hair cut and a beard trim... Probably even take a bath.

The day would come and the party would begin and the wine would flow... but for some reason not at this wedding. Maybe someone didn't communicate well with the caterer. Too many uninvited guests from the outlying villages around Cana. Who knows?

Mary, Jesus mother, was obviously acting as a wedding coordinator... maybe an aunt to the groom... Some of the noncanonical gospels say she was a relative or good friend of the bride or something like that. Maybe she messed up on the wine order.

She's horrified because no wine means the end of the party. It's just the ultimate social blunder. It's like the pastor saying after the recessional... **"We know you all were invited to the reception but as it turns out the bride's family can only afford to feed fifty of you so only the first five rows can go to the Petroleum club. The rest of you can come, but don't eat."**

Wine was a big deal... and not just because it helped folks get beyond their inhibitions and sing fuller, dance longer, and laugh louder. It was symbolic. The Rabbis said, **"Without wine, there is no joy."** It wasn't about getting drunk, which was a disgrace... it was about a celebration... and Mary is petrified that this one is about to come to a screeching halt.

She turns to her son and says with a white face... **"We're out of wine."** And we can't tell if she means, **"We're out of wine, do that miraculous thing I've seen you practicing out back."** Or if she's simply saying, **"You think maybe you and your buddies could high-tail it back to the Walmart in Nazareth and by a wagon load of box-o-wine?"**

Jesus' response isn't rude, like it seems. He uses a common phrase and he's likely saying something like, **"Relax and let me handle this."**

Mary winks at him, turns to the servants and says, **"He's in charge now. Do whatever he tells you to do."**

Now take a step back from the story... Hover above Cana a bit and above this religious culture. Jesus has them fill 6 pots, "which held water for purification," John makes a point of telling us.

John is telling more that a fun story about a wedding. He's telling you about the spiritual journey and he is also telling you what it takes to have a faith that is compelling.

These weren't wine vats...

or wineskins...

They weren't vases holding drinking water.

These pots held the water everyone used to get clean. They had to wash with the right water in the right way... water flowing from finger tips off the elbow, like surgeons getting ready for surgery. And with the same concern for contamination. You didn't want to be contaminated, only it wasn't about germs... it was about that virus called sin and about being clean enough for God.

John only has to say, **“Water for purification... for ceremonial washing,”** and everyone knows he’s talking about a religious system which made people pure and not about folks minding their manners before a meal.

The story isn’t about hospitality anymore... it is, however, still about joy... which is the point. It’s the aim of the spiritual life and in this system, it had run out... John’s story tells us.

It was a system centered in law and before we go dismissing it all... we should point out how important it was and is. It’s where most of us begin the journey. **“This is right and this is wrong.”** There’s not a parent among us who hasn’t seen that as an imperative of parenting in the early years.

“Thou shalt stay out of the street.” “Thou shalt say thank you when your grandfather gives you that money.” “Thou shalt not be taking what doesn’t belong to you.”

It’s where we always begin. It was Israel’s beginning... God sent a tablet of ten and said, **“I think if you can live this way we can have a relationship and you can have a healthy society.”**

It’s a place to begin... but if you stay there it will become an empty place and a joyless place... just like those vats were empty at that wedding.

Some folks never move beyond spirituality as a moral code... religion that cleans us up. And if we don’t move beyond it we’ll just keep tweaking the old system... We’ll just wind it tighter, assuming if Ten Commandments are good, then a thousand rules will be even better. If a little morality is what is necessary, a lot of moral obsession is what we must need. And you know what happens then.

External conformity becomes the point... the goal.

“Get the external down...” That’s it.

It’s where we start, but staying there is a joyless, empty thing.

Two weeks ago, we talked about how critical it was to move beyond, right believing. Getting your doctrine straight isn’t life giving. Orthodoxy, straight thinking, is fine... even important, it’s just not transforming.

Well... neither is “orthopraxy”... getting your behavior straight. Living right is a good and necessary thing, but it isn’t enough and if you don’t know that to be true, you’ll eventually find that the joy of life has leaked out and your just spinning your moral wheels... tweaking your code and then tweaking everyone else.

Six pots... there was six... it’s almost perfect. Seven’s the perfect number. Six is good, the law is good, but it isn’t enough. It’s not complete. There has to be an inward reality that fills us and changes us. Wine is a good symbol.

Wine effects us...

It gets in our system...

and interacts with it...

And we act differently.

In John’s story, Jesus makes wine to be consumed... taken in. Internalized. And of course, everyone in the first century church is looking up and past the chalice on the table as the story is read. **“Ohhhhh.... we know about that kind of wine.”**

Jesus, by the power of God, makes somewhere around 150 gallons of that wine... one hundred and fifty. It’s like you’re going to dinner at a friend’s home and you stop by to pick up

a bottle of wine and think, **“Well, I want us to have plenty,”** so you buy 10 bottles... and there’s just four of you but **“You just never want to have too little, you know.”**

150 gallons!!!!!! It’ll just keep flowing and keep flowing and keep flowing. No limit on this grace which pours into our lives. It can’t run out... No ancient wedding party could make a dent in 150 gallons... inexhaustable.

John begins the ministry of Jesus at a place of celebration and with a story about Jesus restoring celebration and insuring it. At one level, it’s a story about Jesus, God in the flesh, loving a good party. At another level, it’s about moving beyond legalism... but at an even deeper level it’s a story about anything you have looked to for meaning and well being and happiness that is less than divine... less than perfect. Faith centered in the finite.

There’s a lot of sixes out there, huh? A lot of things that are a part of life and a part of you that are pretty good, even. They really are sixes.... close to perfect.

Relationships... family... community... church...

Ambition and learning and succeeding...

Accomplishment... Connection... Passion...

Agendas to change this or that... callings.

Lots of “sixes” out there, good things... most of them even full of meaning. None of them perfect and none of them capable of filling you up inside and transforming you, not ultimately. The external stuff will always lead us to the same place.

Maybe you’ve learned that already. And maybe after years of looking to that “six” whatever it is, you’ve also looked inside and said, **“I’m empty now... I’ve run out of wine.”**

A painful but good place to be. The place of kenosis... emptied... Nada... Nothingness, it is the place we all must arrive... it’s a good place. To be aware of your own emptiness and to finally admit the things of this world can’t fill you... not completely. Not even the good stuff.

So what do you do? Once you’ve seen it... known it... what do you do? I’d follow Mary’s lead. You look to the One who can make a difference. You say, **“We’ve run out of wine.”** And then you do whatever he tells you to do.

And you watch and celebrate the miracle that takes place within you. You receive what Christ has to give... You take it in.

The bread of life... given to nourish you eternally.

The cup of salvation, a transforming miracle of God’s grace.

Take all of it.

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