



“Why the Divine Reluctance?”

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John 2:1-11

We know this story pretty well, don't we? We've heard about the wedding at Cana time and time again since it comes around every few years in the lectionary. Plus, it's one of those narratives we just love to tell because it has drama and suspense and action. If you remember, Jesus is baptized, he's ready to begin his earthly ministry, and he performs his very first miracle... he turns water into wine. This story is well-worn. I've preached on this Scripture half a dozen times in my career as a minister: several times in worship services and, of course, it is used in weddings as well. In fact, when I officiate weddings, I usually tell the couple that God's love is overflowing and that Jesus really loves a good party. Because isn't that what this text is about? Isn't God's love extravagant?

It's easy to preach about God's extravagant love. It's easy to preach that God's generosity was filled to the brim and Jesus helped to continue the celebration for days. Because like any good party, the party surely would have died down and drearily dispersed without anything to drink. It's easy to preach that God took the old, dirty water of the Jewish law, the hand washing water from the ritual jars, and turned it into the most decadent wine. It's easy to preach of how God turned an ordinary wedding, in an ordinary town, with an ordinary couple, attended by ordinary people, who were served ordinary wine, into a magical display of extraordinary and extravagant grace. That's easy to preach. And that's what I preached... before.

My view has changed a bit over the years, and in this season of my life, I find myself angry with an overindulgent Jesus giving drunks more wine and extending a decadent party for days when he had a desperate ministry of hope and healing to initiate. I like to think that Jesus was reluctant at the beginning because he saw the bigger picture. Weddings aren't all fun and celebrative. Things don't always go smoothly. Amanda's and my wedding certainly wasn't picture perfect. There were a lot of stressful moments. My father-in-law broke my parents garbage disposal while preparing food. We literally had to bust through a wall to unclog a pipe. We planned for the ceremony to take place outside – which, of course, meant that it rained all day long. Amanda and the wedding coordinator spent the entire day frantic and fretting. Fortunately, the rain stopped and it was a balmy 98 degrees at 6pm when the ceremony began. The flower girl threw more temper tantrums than she threw rose petals. And finally, at the reception, we ran out of champagne. It was just like that wedding in Cana that Jesus attended -- we too ran out of booze!

I can relate to this wedding imagery. Our tendency is to gloss over the anxieties, the struggles, and the troubles when we think of weddings. We only see the ceremonies, the parties, the receptions, and the honeymoons. Life is complicated and difficult. There is hurt and pain. The wine does indeed run out. And it happens to everyone. So really, why should Jesus care about

this one wedding? Why does Jesus refuse to snap his fingers and make everything better? Why the divine reluctance?

I'm reading this Wedding at Cana text differently than I ever have before. This year, I see divine reluctance. I see Jesus struggling with the idea of extending the party. He struggles to the point that he even back talks his mother. I mean, you really have to be serious about your convictions to back talk your mama. Many of us know how the severe and stern glare of a mother can change a mind. I wonder if Jesus also felt the harsh gazes of his disciples, of the guests at the party, of the stewards and servants? The people wanted Jesus to act. "This is the time Jesus! Work your magic! Do your thing! Be our Savior of extravagant and abundant love!" But Jesus replied, "My time has not yet come. I can't give you a gluttonous portion of expensive wine when bodies need to be healed, spirits need to be cleansed, demons need to be cast out, food needs to be shared, water needs to be poured, and my blood needs to be spilled. My time has not yet come!" But then he gives in.

With my cloudy and world-weary eyes, as I read the text this time, I'm angry. I am disappointed with Jesus for acquiescing. I'm disheartened this was Jesus's first miracle after his baptism. How do we reconcile this story of lavish generosity that takes place in a world of tremendous need? Dr. Carol Lakey Hess, Associate Professor of Women's Studies at Claremont Graduate School pinpoints the paradox that "we see a world in need, and we believe in [the] one who claimed to bring abundant life to those in need. [Yet] in a world where for so many there is no clean water – let alone fine wine – where is the extravagance of God? In a world where children play in bomb craters the size of thirty-gallon wine jugs; why the divine reluctance? In a world where desperate mothers say to small children, 'We have no food,' why has the hour not yet come? No matter how we rationalize divine activity, we still want to tug at Jesus's sleeve and say, 'They have no wine.'"

I find myself in agreement with Dr. Hess. God is present at a celebrative wedding party, but what about in our political parties? What about in the hungry faces of refugees fleeing war? What about in the hatred and harassment we see in our own country? What about in the religious and cultural violence in the world? Where is God? Where is the abundant and extravagant love of Jesus? Why make 180 gallons of wine but not heal our land? Why the divine reluctance?

Because... divine reluctance ultimately leads us to human initiative. Let me say that again: Divine reluctance leads us to human initiative. We see great abundance and wealth in our lives: food, wine, water, oil, and land – all symbols of abundance and wealth in the Bible as well. But today, all of these resources remind us that we can't seem to spread this abundance to the world and it feels like God is not really helping us. "My hour has not yet come." I would say to Jesus. "Yes, it has! It is now! Now is the hour! Now is the time when we need you. This world needs your concern and it is your time to act. Why aren't you here?" But God IS at work in the world. We are Jesus's hands and feet. We can be the ones to end disputes with Christ's forbearance, we can end hunger with Christ's willingness to share, we can end hurting with Christ's compassion, we can end intolerance with Christ's inclusion, and we can end poverty with Christ's generosity. Jesus's divine reluctance is OUR call to human initiative and to action.

Reflecting on the Wedding at Cana story and Jesus's divine reluctance, we are left with the question, "What are we to do?" Jesus didn't seem ready. The abundance of wine was of no concern to him. God was absent and God's abundance had not yet come. What are we to do with divine reluctance? We do what people in the Bible have always done. We nudge. We nudge God. We lobby God for help, for Jesus to act, for the divine to no longer be reluctant but be present and the provider of prosperity. Blind Bartimaeus hollered out for Jesus, "Son of David, have pity on me!" Abraham bartered God down to a "few good men" before destroying Sodom. Moses and God met face-to-face where Moses forced God's hand by declaring, "Destroy them if you want to God, but kill me too." So, to badger God, to nudge the Divine, is to stand within a well-worn biblical tradition. We are not alone when we nudge God.

But the difference between these pesterers of the divine and our seeing that Jesus refused to act is that we know the end of the story; we know what God had in mind. We know that God had abundance in mind. We know God had extravagant love in mind. We know that this first miracle was a sign of overflowing grace for God's people. Mary, the mother of Jesus, knew this as well, as she clearly sang it in the Magnificat, "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty." She nudged her son. And we should nudge God too. We should nudge God to see what God has in mind. What does God have in mind when we feel the anxiety of mass shootings when attending crowded events? What does God have in mind when terrorists use religions of peace to turn faith into death? What does God have in mind when refugees need food and water and shelter? What does God have in mind when our finances disappear, our faith fails, our jobs are cut, and our health crumbles? What does God have in mind?

We must nudge God. We must take our troubled lives, our troubled world, and this troubling text and we must take the initiative like the mother of Jesus and nudge God. "Jesus, they have no wine." And Jesus sees us. Jesus takes notice. Jesus told the servants what to do, and a miracle was accomplished. Divine reluctance was immediately changed into extraordinary and abundant love due to human intention and holy prodding.

Mary nudged the Divine, and I realize... so must I. Sometimes my elbow gets sore and tired and my voice becomes harsh. But I pray for the divine to act. I nudge God to take the pain away from losing my son. I nudge God to redeem my call to ministry when the well is dry. I nudge God to heal my body. I nudge God to make cancer a thing of the past. I nudge God to use this small Royal Lane community to make an extravagant and abundant impact in our city. I nudge God to reveal our passions and purposes and discern where our spiritual gifts fit into the church and the city. I nudge God and I will keep nudging God! And I'm probably just like you, I feel like I'm pestering God, bothering God, and that I'm too angry about God's divine reluctance.

But the story is clear, through Mary's holy nudge and her human intervention, the sacrificial face of Jesus was seen in the reflection of the water and in the laughter of the wine. Today, our neighbors may not realize Jesus is working through us and that God is invading the world with "the good stuff" of abundant love. But we must share God's love anyway. Let us nudge God, and faithfully, sometimes stubbornly, take action. God's abundance happens when we become stewards of God's miracles and share our loaves and fishes, distribute our holy wine, heal the

sick, befriend the poor, and share the extravagant, abundant, overflowing love of God. There is enough for everyone, all of God's people.

Yes, Jesus was correct when he said, "What concern is this party and this wine to ME?" He was correct because the concern must reside within us. Jesus's divine reluctance should anger us but also prod us to human intervention in order to bring God's abundance to the world. What might we do to nudge God today in order to bring forth God's extravagant love?

Amen.