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BETTER THAN AN AIRLINE

John 2:1-12

Elmer Bendiner was an American journalist and author in the 20th century. He was also a veteran of World War 2. He won the Distinguished Flying Cross as a navigator on a B-17. He wrote a book titled *The Fall Of Fortresses* about his experiences making bombing runs over Europe. One particular mission over the German city of Kassel his airplane was badly hit by flak from Nazi antiaircraft guns. That wasn’t unusual, but what was unusual was their gas tank was hit. It seemed like a miracle that a 20 millimeter cannon shell could hit their gas tank and not cause it to explode. However, his pilot, Bohn Fawkes, told him there was a story behind that seeming miracle.

The morning after that raid Fawkes asked their crew chief to retrieve the shell as a souvenir of their seeming astounding luck. The crew chief told him there wasn’t just one shell in the tank, there were 11! The gas tank had been hit by 11 shells and not one of them caused it to explode. They told Fawkes that the shells had been sent out to armorers to be defused. The armorers told him that they didn’t have the shells anymore because Intelligence had come and gotten them, though they had no idea why. Fawkes later found out why. When the armorers opened the shells they found no explosive charges in them. All of them were empty, except for one. That shell contained a carefully rolled piece of paper. There was some writing scrawled on it. Eventually it was determined that the writing was in Czech. They found someone who could translate it. It said, “This is all we can do for you now.”

Someone was doing what they could to look out for those American airmen. Wouldn’t it be great if there was someone looking out for us, someone who could actually make a difference? It turns out there is. We will find out about that today as we look at John 2:1-12.

MARY BROUGHT A PROBLEM TO JESUS

Verse 1 tells us “On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee.” Cana was a village a few miles from Nazareth. Today there are two sites that are considered possible for first century Cana. Both of them claim to have one of the stone jars that show up in this story, which tells you all you need to know about the supposed biblical relics that can be seen in the Holy Land today. Here’s one of the coins Peter found in the mouth of a fish to pay his temple tax, here’s some of the mud Jesus put on a blind man’s eyes when he healed him. It’s all kind of ridiculous.

This wedding may have been in Jesus’ extended family. Mary and Jesus were there with Jesus’ brothers according to verse 12. The fact that Mary seems to have some sense of responsibility for things going well suggests that it was family involved. Whatever the case, the problem was that the host ran out of wine before they ran out of festivities.

I’m a bit of a curmudgeon when it comes to weddings. Okay, more than a bit, since my current favorite saying about them is weddings are evil. I go the old geezer route and say, “Back when we got married the wedding was in a church.” How did we let that get away from us? It was a reminder that marriage is before God and is a holy institution. The vacuum left by the absence of churches has spawned the wedding venue industry, which is, in my mind, one of the great rip-offs of our time. The reception back in the good old days was cake and punch in the church fellowship hall. That has been replaced by the even bigger rip off involving caterers, party rentals, D. J.s and all the rest. A wedding becomes only slightly less expensive than trying to put people on the moon.

However, I have to admit that in Jesus’ day weddings were an even bigger event than they have become now. Today a wedding and reception now can burn much of your entire day. Back then a wedding might last for days. Part of the reason for this is something I mentioned last week. Life was hard for most people. They were poor. They scraped an existence out of meager farms. They worked hard from dawn to dusk. There was very little in the form of entertainment or escape. Weddings were one of the great social events in a village. It was a chance for everyone to get a break from the grind of their daily lives. So it was a big event that lasted a long time.

Back then the groom’s family paid for the wedding. Running out of wine before the party was over would have been a huge embarrassment. The whole town was often invited, and everyone would know that the groom and his family had dropped the ball big time, and ruined everyone’s fun. Some people have claimed the wine problem happened because Jesus showed up with a group of disciples that were not expected. It was the old inflating wedding guest list problem. However, that was not the problem. Verse 2 says “Jesus and his disciples had also been invited.” No, this problem occurred because the hosts somehow underestimated how much wine they were going to need. It was a big fail.

I was embarrassed when my first day as a husband was less than auspicious. I’ve told you before, friends had given us a week in a condo on Kauai for our honeymoon. They gave me a map and papers with all the information we needed to get there. I forgot them. I realized on the flight to Hawaii that I didn’t have them, I didn’t know where the condo was or the name of it. Congratulations, Laurie, you’ve married an idiot. As unfortunate as that was, this new husband’s failure was far worse in their culture.

Running out of a key element of the party was a really bad look. It would have been humiliating for the groom’s family and for the bride. Many years ago we used to have communion as a part of our Christmas Eve service. One Christmas Eve when we had 3 services, we underestimated how many people would come. After the second service I was told we were out of the crackers and juice for communion. What could we do? We only had minutes between services to solve the problem. I sent someone to a store close by and all they could get was wheat thins and cranberry juice. So that’s what everyone partook of for communion in the last service. There was there was no store the wedding hosts could run to for last minute supplies. There was no substitute for wine. Back then there was no fruit juice, no sodas, no tea or coffee, and fresh water was a problem. What were they going to do?

This is where Mary, Jesus’ mom, steps in. She seemed to feel that she needed to do something to help the couple out. Notice that after the wedding events according to verse 12 Jesus, “went down to Capernaum with his mother and brothers and his disciples.” Who is missing? It was Joseph. Apparently he had already passed away. Mary couldn’t take the problem to her husband because he was no longer alive. So she did what she usually did in facing problems, took it to her oldest son, Jesus.

This resulted in a somewhat curious interaction between Mary and Jesus. She told him the hosts were out of wine, and he responded, “Woman, why do you involve me?” Calling her woman seems a bit disrespectful to us, but it wasn’t. Jesus referred to her that way on occasion, and I think it was just a way of saying, “Mom.” But his response seems odd. The NIV translation has Jesus saying, “Why do you involve me?” In the Greek text Jesus literally said, “What is that to me and to you?” There are a number of theories of exactly what that meant. I’ve gone back and forth on this verse over the years. I’ve concluded that he meant pretty much what it sounds like, which is, “What does that have to do with us?” In other words, “How is that our problem? What am I supposed to do about it?”

Then Jesus said, “My hour has not yet come.” Again I’ve wrestled quite a bit with why he said that. I believe that what was happening was Mary knew that Jesus was destined to be and do something unique and spectacular in God’s plan. She could never forget the visit from an angel and the once in history manner of her pregnancy with Jesus. She remembered the astounding events surrounding his birth. Now all of that had been confirmed by John the Baptist who had declared that Jesus was the Chosen One, the Messiah. I think she was being a Jewish mother. Her boy was going to do something far more significant than being a doctor. He’s 30 years old. It’s time. Even wild man John had said so. She’s saying, “This is the perfect opportunity. Do your thing. Show them who you really are by solving this problem in a dramatic way.” Jesus’ response was that it was not quite time to accomplish the real point of his life. When he spoke of his “hour” it often referred to the cross and his resurrection. He wasn’t going to overtly declare that he was Messiah yet, and suffer the consequences that would ultimately come from that. However, he would comply with his mother’s request.

JESUS HAD AN ASTOUNDING SOLUTION

It’s possible that Mary understood him to be saying he wasn’t ready to do anything dramatic and she did her Jewish mom thing and overrode him, telling the caterers, “Do whatever he tells you.” But I think she understood that he was going to address the problem, so she told them to follow his instructions, knowing he would fix the wine shortage.

I’m pretty sure John, who wrote this book, observed this interaction and what ensued. I think that because of the details he includes in the account. He says the host family had 6 stone jars. What is the significance of the number 6? I think it signifies that’s how many jars they had there, nothing more. He’s giving us details like that to show he saw what happened. These jars were used for people to wash their hands as required by the Mosaic Law so they would be ritually clean. Another detail is each of them would hold somewhere between 20 and 30 gallons of water.

Jesus told the servants to fill up the jars with clean water. Can you imagine what those servants were thinking? They knew that the host was about to run out of wine. Now Jesus tells them to fill up jars with water. How is that going to help? Did he think they were going to be able to dilute the little remaining wine with that much water to stretch the supply? Our grandson likes to drink what he calls “juice water.” This actually has a long history. When she was a very young child our daughter, Carissa, had some issues that our pediatrician said could be helped by having her drink cranberry juice. To this day, her favorite juice is cranberry juice. Recently she and Michael have been giving Wesley very diluted cranberry juice to drink. That’s what he calls juice water. To him, it’s better then plain water. So, the servants must have been thinking, “Is the plan to try to pacify the guests by serving wine water?” They’d have to be awfully drunk to not notice that the wine was tasting ridiculously weak.

But they did as Mary instructed, and followed Jesus’ directions. Then he upped the ante. He told them to draw some of the water and take it to the head caterer. No mixing up some diluted wine. Just serve him the water. No doubt they were thinking, “Okay, I don’t see how this is going to help, but whatever you say.” That’s when the big shock happened. The head caterer tasted it and said, “Hey, this wine is way better than the stuff you’ve been serving.” I’m sure the servants were saying, “Um, what now? That’s not wine, it’s water!” Somehow, what had been water was suddenly wine. Not just any wine, but the best wine they’d ever tasted. The crisis was averted, the party went on, and a good time was had by all.

IMPLICATIONS

JESUS REVEALED HIS GLORY

Verse 11 gives us John’s explanation of the astounding event he had witnessed. He said what Jesus did that day, “Was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.” Glory is that which makes someone or something noteworthy, that makes them stand out. Glory is the “Oh wow” factor. We went trick or treating with Wesley and his family on Halloween. That evening the sunset for a time was spectacular. It started off looking cool, but then the colors became intense and there was that moment when we said, “Wow, look at that sunset.” We were remarking on the glory of the sunset.

John said that this event, the first miracle Jesus did, revealed his glory. It showed something about him. Do you know who Christian McCaffrey is? He is a football player. He played at Stanford in college and he was widely considered to be one of the best players in the country. He was drafted in the first round by Carolina in 2017. He had a couple of good years, but suffered some injuries, and playing on a bad team never was the player he was expected to be. Then in the middle of October Carolina traded him to San Francisco. In his second game with them on October 30 against the Rams, he had an impressive showing. He racked up a lot of yards both running and catching passes. Most notably, he scored a touchdown running, then made a phenomenal leaping catch in the end zone for another touchdown, and he actually threw a long pass for another touchdown. He was the first running back to get touchdowns running, receiving and passing in a game since Ladanian Tomlinson did it back in 2005. He showed what he is capable of doing, and everyone noticed. He revealed his football glory through those feats. John said Jesus revealed his glory for the first time through this incident.

Jesus showed that he wasn’t merely another wise religious man. He wasn’t just a great political leader, there to head a movement to win freedom for his people. He wasn’t merely a revolutionary person or a man of wisdom. He showed that he had power over nature itself, and that’s something no ordinary human has. In that incident he changed the structure of H2O and made it into something different. This clearly showed his glory. Later he would perform other signs that would reveal his glory. He would feed thousands of people with a tiny bit of food. He would calm a storm, he would heal a blind man, he would bring a dead man out of his tomb, he would conquer death himself. These things were all “Oh Wow” events that revealed he was far more than a mere human being. John never forgot how this affected him. He realized that Jesus was far more than a leader or wise teacher.

John said as a result of seeing his glory, his first disciples believed. He knew that from first hand experience. Maybe Jesus was like wild man John, an iconoclastic and charismatic character that would have new wisdom and insight. That’s why John told them to follow him. But after this event they knew he was far more. They weren’t quite sure just who Jesus was, but they knew he had some kind of divine power. He raised the ante, putting their belief in him in an entirely different category.

This is what this story should do for us. It gives us a glimpse of his glory and, as a result, a reason to know that he is much more than just an amazing human being. Yes, but we already believed that, which is why we’re here today. True, but we all know the nature of our faith. It is not perfect. John said he and the other disciples believed in Jesus after this incident. But remember what happened in Luke 8:22-25. Jesus and the guys were in a boat crossing the lake when a violent squall came in. It was so bad that the boat was in danger of sinking and ending the movement right there when they all drowned. Jesus handled that situation by telling the storm to knock it off, and it was instantly calm. Verse 25 says, “In fear and amazement they asked one another, ‘Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water and they obey him.’”

I thought they already believed in him after the water into wine thing. Yes, they did. Sort of. Just like we believe in him until the right storm comes along to shake our faith. They believed in Jesus, they knew he had some power over nature itself, but they had more believing to do.

Our faith is much like that. We believe in Jesus. And then a violent storm comes along and we start to totter. This passage reveals Jesus’ glory to us. We need to remember when we face daunting circumstances who Jesus is. He has the power to change the molecular structure of water. That reminds us of his glory, that he is the King of all creation, and has the ability to deal with whatever we face as well.

JESUS CARES ABOUT US

As we go through the life of Jesus we are going to see him do some amazing things. He’s going to heal sick people of all kinds, he’s going to feed hungry people, he’s going to save his disciples from a storm, he’s going to raise a man from the dead. In all those astounding events we can see why he would have acted. He helped people with grievous situations, healing the blind, the lepers, the cripples, even the dead.

That brings up a question about this first sign that Jesus performed. Why did he do this miracle? He did it to save some people some social embarrassment. No one’s life was a stake. No one’s life was forever altered by this. He just helped some people out of a sticky situation. Had he not done so, life would have gone on for those people. They might have been humiliated, but they’d get over it.

In his very first overt sign Jesus demonstrated that he cares about people, even to the extent of dealing with issues that might not be that big of a deal. He cares about even the “small” issues of our lives. In Philippians 4:6 Paul wrote, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” This raises the question, what should we pray about? What kinds of things rise to the level of being a cause for prayer because they are big enough and important enough? According to Paul, we should make requests to God in every situation. Well, what if it isn’t really that important? You mean like being embarrassed by a social failure? Apparently that would be a situation to make a request. Mary made just such a request in that kind of a situation.

Laurie is a terrific example of this for me. She prays about everything. I’ve seen her pray about the weather and about parking spaces. It would be easy to say that’s ridiculous, that God doesn’t care about things like that and certainly isn’t going to magically change the weather or create parking spaces. But then you’d likely say God doesn’t care about people having wine at a party and certainly isn’t going to create wine out of water. Except he did.

The rule of thumb is revealed by the first phrase of Philippians 4:6. “Do not be anxious about anything.” If you are anxious about it, instead, pray about it. How big does it have to be? Just big enough to cause you stress or worry. If it does that, pray about it. Can Jesus really care about us to the extent that he even cares about the little things in our lives? This incident says loudly that he does. What a difference that makes. Laurie and I had a vacation all planned for the end of October. We were going to Hawaii. We had our flights booked, reserved rental cars, and had hotel reservations all set. Then melanoma intervened. Instead of enjoying Hawaii I had a PET scan, an MRI and appointments with an oncologist. I can assure you, it was a lousy trade. I had to cancel our car reservations and the hotel reservations, and that was easy. Of course I had to deal with our flights too. The flight to Hawaii was no problem. We used frequent flyer miles to get it, and the airline returned the miles back to our account when we canceled the flight. But the flight home was another matter. The plan was to reschedule that flight for next year when we can hopefully try again to make our trip. There I ran into a snag. The airline agent said I couldn’t do it. The reason was that we had initially scheduled that trip for last year, but we had to postpone the trip to this year. They said when we did that we were given a credit, and that we had to use that credit within one calendar year. So we could only reschedule that trip before December 31 this year. I explained that we had to change this trip because I have been diagnosed with cancer and have to be treated quickly. The agent said she could not change the policy, that what I would have to do is appeal the decision to their consumer affairs division. I’ve done that. They said, “We’ll get back to you.” The problem is, that airline flies more than 10 million passengers every year. I’m literally only one of 10 million people. The airline doesn’t know me. They have no personal interest in me and my problems. They don’t especially care about me beyond kind of wanting my business. They might well say no, and there will be nothing I can do about it. This isn’t one of the biggest airlines, but it is still a huge organization, and the problems of one puny person are not of great concern to them.

Now I’m dealing with a much more serious problem. Medicare has denied my oncologist’s request to treat me with the drugs that have the best chance of curing me. When Medicare says no, there is no insurance that will touch it. Here’s the problem. Medicare is a monolithic government organization. They only care about their protocols and money. They don’t care about me. If their decision means I might die from this disease, that’s too bad. But not really. They don’t care. It doesn’t matter to them.

If I’m not especially noticeable to an airline or a government agency, why would I think that the God who rules the entire creation would have any interest in me? Why would he care about the often trivial details of life of one, mostly anonymous and insignificant human being? It is because he says he does, and he demonstrated it in the events of John 2. We see it when Jesus did an astounding miracle to save some loved ones from nothing more than embarrassment.

In the New Living Translation of Psalm 56:8 David says to the Lord, “You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.” God records our sorrows, our troubles, all of them, in his book. His tears matter to us. He collects them. This is how God cares about us.

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There is a reason God cares about even the details of our lives. In John 1:12 we saw that he gives those who believe in Jesus the right to become his children. If you believe in Jesus, you are God’s child. He cares about his children even more than we care about ours. Laurie and I were helping take care of our grandsons, Wesley and Hunter, one evening not long ago. Wesley and I were upstairs playing with his Hot Wheels set. There was a part of it that he hadn’t played with, but he got interested in it. This particular toy has what is essentially a catapult that fires the toy cars down a track at a dramatic speed. We got it out and tried to figure out how it worked. When we got it working he was excited about it. I have to say, I thought it was pretty cool because those cars fired out of that catapult. We played with it for a bit, but he was so excited about it he decided Nana had to see it. He went downstairs where Nana was helping with Hunter and talking to Carissa. He said to her, “Nana, look.” He wanted her to come upstairs to see this fun new thing. At first she didn’t hear him because she was engaged in a conversation with Carissa. She was also very busy. But when he got her attention and she realized he wanted her to see this marvelous new thing, she went with him to see it.

Laurie didn’t do that because she is a huge fan of Hot Wheels. She didn’t do it because she was interested in this new thing. She didn’t do it because it was important that she see this. She did it because she cares about Wesley. If it matters to him, then it matters to her, because he is her grandson whom she loves dearly.

If we care about it, it matters to God, because we are his children and he cares about us. How different life is, the world is, because God is not indifferent to us. He actually cares about us. He cares to the extent that if we might grow anxious about it, he matters to him, even if it is actually the most trivial of matters. This is crucial for Laurie and me right now. My journey through the medical world has been a feast of frustration. I feel like the ancient people of Israel, stuck aimlessly wandering through a wilderness, only through no fault of my own. It has felt like doctors, labs, doctors’ staffs, administrators, government agencies and insurance companies have all conspired to make sure I don’t get treated. In a situation where acting as quickly as possible is important there have been “don’t you people care?” The answer is apparently not. Here is what keeps us sane. God cares. Our hope is not in people. It’s in him.

JESUS MAKES THE ORDINARY SPECIAL

One more remarkable thing I see in this story is that Jesus was able to take something ordinary, some regular water, and turn it into something extraordinary. It wasn’t just wine, it was the best wine. The head caterer was amazed because normally people serve the best wine at the beginning of the party, then bring out the cheaper stuff when people’s senses have been dulled by the wine and can’t tell the difference. But this wine Jesus came up with was better than anything they had.

There is a lesson in that for us. Think about people that Jesus was choosing to be his key followers. What was remarkable about John, Andrew, Peter, James and the others? Absolutely nothing. Had it not been for Jesus, what would have been known about them? Zero. They were just guys. Fishermen, anonymous blue collar guys who lived their lives in utter obscurity. There was exactly nothing special about them.

But in Acts 4 Peter and John, a couple of fishermen, were hauled before the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of their nation, in effect to stand trial. Verse 13 says, “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.” Jesus turned those ordinary, anonymous men, into people who changed the world. Thousands of years later we read about them, we name our children after them. Jesus took the ordinary and turned it into something truly extraordinary.

Renowned poet, writer and speaker, David Whyte has said, “No matter the self conceited importance of our labors, we are all compost for worlds we cannot yet imagine.” In other words, no matter how important you think you are, you’re nothing but compost in the long run. In other words, your life means nothing, even if you think it means something big. If there were no God in the picture that would be true. But this passage tells us God is in the picture, and God can and does make something remarkable out of even compost like us.

This is huge. Philosopher and writer Rebecca Goldstein wrote, “We can’t pursue our lives without thinking that our lives matter…Clinical depression is when you are convinced that you don’t and will never matter.” What saves us is that as anonymous as we seem to be, our lives matter to God and he will do something with them.

This means a lot to me personally, because I am as ordinary as humans come. I am the living, breathing example of nothing special, the human equivalent of vanilla ice cream. There is zero remarkable about me, and it would be easy for me to think that my life is anonymous, insignificant and pointless. But this passage reminds me that God can take this ordinary life and make something truly special out of it. I may not even know what that is, but it is still true. That changes my view of myself and my life. It means I can be thankful each day, knowing that somehow God is making something beautiful and significant out of my humble life.