

## Signs and Sommeliers

Reverend Jenny McDevitt

John 2.1--11

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There is no reason any of you should remember this. But, on my first Sunday in this pulpit, which, at the time, meant my first Sunday standing in this pulpit in an empty room and recording myself, that first Sunday among you, I said it's always a helpful thing to pay attention to "firsts" in scripture. They aren't the only important moments, but scripture was composed very carefully, very intentionally, and so most things that happen first tend to communicate deeply important truths that should be remembered as we continue reading. I couldn't help but think of "firsts" today, since it is our first annual meeting with many of us together in the same room — though to be sure, I am mindful of and grateful for all those joining us online, too! And, I do not mean to imply that this meeting will be more defining than any others that follow it. The past couple of years have simply made me grateful for moments that might have been very casual in the past but now carry deeper importance because we can be together.

In our reading today, Jesus is at a wedding in Cana together with his friends and his mother and crowds of others. Presumably they are having a wonderful time. It is early on in Jesus' ministry. All he has done is invite a few people to follow him. Based on the glowing recommendation from John the Baptist, a guy who is not easy to impress, Peter and Andrew and Phillip and Nathanael are convinced he is worth checking out. And, as soon as have they fallen in line behind him, he promises, "You will see great things! You will see heaven opened up and angels coming down! There are great things ahead!" He's certainly

got our attention. What great things are we about to witness? How is he going to change the world and all of us in it? What "first" thing will forever define his ministry? And then it happens. His first sign. It's worth reminding us all that John's gospel never uses the word "miracle." It uses the word "sign" to describe the exact same type of event, because the way John understands it, these amazing moments in Jesus' ministry are never about Jesus at all. They are about God, and what God's love can do. He calls them signs because they point to the source of Jesus' miraculous abilities. And so, in what is surely one of the most important moments of his entire ministry, in his first opportunity to point clearly to God, what does Jesus do? He restocks the bar.<sup>1</sup>

Now, I am all in favor of this activity, but it does seem odd as an inaugural event. Think about all the other signs Jesus performs. He walks on water. He heals people, several times over. He feeds more than 5,000 people with a child's afternoon snack. He raises Lazarus from the dead, for heaven's sake. That's the kind of greatness we are expecting, right? But, true to form, Jesus rarely gives us what we are expecting. What we get in this case is six stone water jars. After his mother tells the servers "Do whatever he tells you," Jesus looks around to see what he has to work with and sees little more than those six stone jars, which, by the way, is an odd little detail to slide in into this story. But, biblically speaking, six is a bummer number. Seven? Now, seven would be useful. Seven is perfect. How many days in the creation story? Seven. How many days for Noah to load up the ark? Seven. How many times

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<sup>1</sup> This fantastic line comes from the Rev. Mary Ann McKibben Dana.

are we to forgive? Seventy times seven. How many signs in this gospel? How many churches in Revelation? Seven. How many jars would make this story perfect? Seven. Unfortunately, six is all he's got. And six is one short. Incomplete. Imperfect. Six is close, but not quite. It's making JV when you had your heart set on varsity. It's the marriage that is intact, but missing something. It's the job that puts food on the table but doesn't feed your soul. Six is not what we expect after Jesus says, "You are going to see great things." It's not what we expect, but it sure is honest. Life is full of six jar situations.

We are full of six jar situations. Think about it. We still live in a world where racism runs rampant. We live in a world where guns find their way into schools far too often. Too many people go to bed hungry, or without a roof above their heads. A pandemic has taken the lives of more than 5.5 million people worldwide. Political divides are pulling at the once tightly-knit seams of this country. Relationships of all kinds struggle and crumble. We are overworked and exhausted, or underworked and anxious, and every time parents think they're going to make it through the week there's another classroom quarantine or daycare closure, and every plan you've had is thrown out the window yet again. So maybe some of us resonate most clearly with Mary's words before we even get to the jars. She actually speaks first in this story, and this is what she says: "They have no wine." Wine, in biblical times, was wine, but it was also so much more than wine. Wine was the sign of life, of endurance, of strength. And, Mary looks around at the people gathered and realizes they have run out. There is nothing left. Have you ever felt like that? Do you maybe feel like that today? Days when it all seems like not enough. When it seems like there is nothing left — no more energy, no more time, not enough volunteers, not enough childcare, no more patience, and not enough people.

Whenever it feels like there is no wine, remember the story. Remember what comes next. Jesus takes those six stone water jars and floods the party with an absurd amount of wine. If you do the math, it's about the equivalent of 180 gallons of wine, the finest wine the servers have ever tasted. Wine so abundant and so delicious the wedding celebration shows absolutely no sign of slowing down. Jesus takes what's available and makes the best of it. Actually, he makes a miracle of it. "This is what you have to offer?" he says. "All right then," he says. "I can work with this." And it was then, the gospel tells us, that Jesus reveals his glory. It is in taking our well-intended but incomplete, imperfect offerings of ourselves, and transforming them into overwhelming goodness, that Jesus says definitively: *This is what I am all about. This is who I am. This is what I can do.*

So if you are waiting for the perfect moment, when the time is right; if you are waiting for all the stars to align; if you are waiting for greatness; If you are waiting for seven jars in any area of your life — *remember the story.*

The other day, a friend reminded me of a book, Good to Great by Jim Collins. While I was horrified to discover the book is now more than 20 years old, the goal of the book is to help people and businesses break through barriers and become their best selves. This is the opening line: "Good is the enemy of great." His basic argument is that if we are content to settle for what is good, we'll never achieve anything that is great. He's right. But I think the reverse is true, too. Because if I understand this gospel story at all, it's saying: Don't let great be the enemy of good. Don't let the quest for perfection stand in the way of overflowing joy. Don't let your doubts about God prevent you from living out your faith. Don't let your nerves about saying the wrong thing keep you from reaching out to a heartbroken neighbor. Don't let the voice in the back of your

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head keep you from canceling a few plans and taking a holy nap. Don't let a messy house or a full calendar keep you from opening your doors or your hearts with hospitality. Don't let the impossible ideal get in the way of the acceptable effort. Don't let great be the enemy of the good, good news.

Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. I'm sure you remember, and I'm sure the outpouring of mission effort from this church was faithful. I am sure of this because I know you, but I know a particular story from Kansas City. It was not long after the hurricane hit that my colleague Tom received a phone call. He was asked if a few busloads of evacuees could be brought to Prairie Village. If Village Church could take responsibility for effort once they arrived. "Well, let me see," he said. "Let me call the Session and see what we can do." "Tom," the voice on the other end of the phone said, "These people are already on the bus. The key is in the ignition. We don't have any time to wait. If there is any way you can say yes, we'll be headed your way before you've hung up the phone." Fifteen hours later, the first bus was in the parking lot. Talk to anyone from Village, and they will tell you how it was unquestionably the right thing to do. And then they will tell you how chaotic it was and how so many of the things they did ended up being the wrong things. Classrooms were filled floor to ceiling with supplies, all of it given in earnest, only fractions of which ended up being usable. For every answer they could come up with, two more answers were simply "We don't know." The building was overwhelmed with members and neighbors alike who all said — yes, strangers can come and stay in my home. But there was no record kept of who went where. They tried, but it was woefully incomplete. And yet. Many of the evacuees eventually returned to New Orleans, or started a new life in a new place. Some of them remained in Kansas City. A few still attend Village, and I remember a conversation with one of them, a

gentleman named Joseph. "It was horrible," he said. "It was frightening. We had to leave our home. It was the worst day ever."

And then he paused. "Well," he said, "what this church did. That was good. That was very, very good."

A parking lot. Some unused classrooms. Imperfect systems. Incomplete records. Inappropriate supplies. Or maybe ... a pandemic. A city in the south. A church in the capital. A day in February. Or any other day, really, filled with people who might not be too full up themselves. These are just some of the places and some of the circumstances where miracles are born. In some of the most unpredictable, unpolished, unlikely moments, God's glory is revealed. I don't know what tomorrow holds. It may be our proudest day yet. It may be a six-jar sort of mess. I don't know. But I can promise you this — God will be there. Because God does not wait for the perfect moment. God just shows up in grace and in glory no matter what, flooding our lives with hope and presence and love. Flooding all our lives with good, good news. That is both the first, and ultimately the final, word of the gospel. And I don't know about you, but I will drink to that.