

“Overcoming Our Reluctance and Pursuing Joy”

John 2:1–11

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January 16, 2022

The familiar story we have read from John 2 about Jesus changing water into wine is a regular part of the traditional Epiphany readings, but it is a text that has given rise to much humor and a bit of consternation, and not only among pious, teetotaling Baptists from the South.

In the realm of humor, when a couple getting married in another setting chose this passage for their wedding ceremony, every other person at the reception told me that I cost the bride’s parents an enormous sum of money by using this passage, as if people in this day need clergy approval to have a glass of wine.

In the realm of consternation, when a congregant of my mentor’s who wanted him to preach an anti-alcohol sermon years ago was confronted with this story and asked if she believed that Jesus really did change water into wine, she replied, “Well, I suppose I do, but it has been an embarrassment to me all of my life.”

Such are our responses to this text, but there is a more serious question to ask here. In John, this is Jesus’ first miracle, the one that launches his entire ministry and thus shapes it to some extent. John doesn’t use the term *miracle*, he refers to these actions as *signs*, indicating that the point is not just that Jesus does miraculous things but what these actions say about who he is — not just another teacher or miracle worker but the Word who has become flesh, God incarnate. But why would this be his first sign? It just doesn’t make sense.

Setting aside traditional Southern piety, most of Jesus’ miracles involve the healing of various illnesses, the alleviation of suffering, the restoration of life. There doesn’t seem to be a great need here, just a bit of concern over meeting expectations of hospitality at a wedding feast — though as the father of the groom in an April wedding this year, I have come to see that this is no small matter... But on the scale of cosmic need, this doesn’t rate very high, and Jesus himself seems

reluctant to help when his mother asks him to do so. What are we to make of this story? Why is this Jesus' first miracle? And what does the story have to say to us, other than the obvious, that Jesus can work miracles?

One thing worth pondering is Jesus' reluctance to perform the miracle. His mother tells him they have run out of wine and he responds in what appears to be an abrupt manner, bordering on rudeness. "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." It sounds a bit like, "You have me confused with someone who cares!" or simply "Not my problem!" There are ways to understand his reference to his mother as "woman" — I have been known to use this as a strange term of endearment for Dana... woman... but the point is Jesus is reluctant to perform this miracle.

We don't know why. He says his hour — meaning the time for his suffering, death and resurrection — has not yet come, but why would a simple miracle at a wedding feast lead to this? There is no indication that he is opposed to meeting this particular need. He is not steeped in Southern piety. Perhaps he is reluctant to get his ministry started because he knows where it will lead.

He reveals this kind of reluctance when he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane for the cup of suffering to pass him by, if possible, but ultimately, he says to God — not my will, but yours. Ultimately Jesus overcomes his reluctance at every turn, changing water into wine, launching his ministry, teaching and healing, continuing all the way to the cross and the empty tomb.

Like Jesus, we often feel reluctant about many things, and some of them we should. When people pressure us to do things that are not in our character, we should resist doing them. Even when it comes to doing good things, including giving time to the church and responding to the needs of people around us, we have to establish some boundaries, we cannot meet every need. But sometimes we feel reluctant to do the very thing we need to do, the thing that lies at the center of our calling.

A friend in another setting years ago expressed great reluctance at fulfilling a particular requirement at the Baptist Theological Seminary at

Richmond. To graduate, you had to participate in a missions immersion experience. She was not opposed to the requirement in general, but she was a little older when she began seminary. She was married and had two children. Her husband worked a demanding job and thus she had primary responsibility for childcare. For her, being out of the country for an extended time would present significant challenges.

So, she expressed her concerns, and when she was told the requirement still had to be met, she proceeded to use every channel possible to achieve a different outcome, to no avail. In the end, she went to Zimbabwe, kicking and screaming, with a mission team to do partnership work with Henry Mugabe, then president at the Baptist Seminary in Gweru. She returned with a radically different perspective.

She fell in love with the people of Zimbabwe, felt a calling to minister with them, to address basic life needs and justice concerns, to extend the work of God's realm. And it wasn't just that she felt this calling, she has spent the rest of her life living it out. One of the first projects she initiated through the Alliance of Baptists was Goats for Gweru, a way of feeding people and empowering community by the simple purchase of a goat. She was reluctant to begin down this path, understandably so, but overcoming her reluctance led to fulfillment.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was reluctant at first to immerse himself in the cause of justice which would fill his life and ultimately take it. He was a bright young preacher and scholar who planned to pastor for a few years and then return to the academy as a professor and administrator. But something happened early on in his pastorate at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955.

A woman named Rosa Parks was arrested when she refused to give up her seat on a bus for a white person. It wasn't the first time this happened to a person of color, but it triggered the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the young Martin King, who was only twenty-six at the time, was asked to get involved and speak to a large crowd. He wanted time to think about it; it was not what he had planned, but he overcame his reluctance, and how different the world is because he did!

Like Jesus, my friend, and Dr. King, we all feel reluctant to do certain things. Sometimes overcoming that reluctance is critical to our calling and sense of fulfillment, not to mention the needs of others.

But there is something else that merits attention in this unusual miracle story. While we think of miracles and the work of God as a whole, including the pursuit of justice, as primarily being about the alleviation of suffering, miracles can also be about creating joy. When the prophet Isaiah speaks of Israel's deliverance from exile, he says that God will rejoice over the people as marital partners rejoice in each other. It is a text chosen to connect to our reading from John. Put another way, we often think of heaven as a place where there are no more tears and sadness, no more suffering and pain. But is eternity only about the absence of unwanted things? Is it not also about the presence of joy?

In a recent article in *Sojourners* (January 22, 2022, p.17), Liuan Huska reflects on a recent trip she took with her children to the Pacific Northwest. In Montana they were moved to wonder when a bald eagle swooped over a herd of grazing deer, but soon that sense of wonder faded as she thought about the forest fires over the next mountain range which created smoke visible for 1,500 miles. "Many of us live with bone-deep grief over what we have lost in the natural world," she writes, but then she notes that grief, pain and anger are not enough to sustain us as we try to shape a better world. Only joy can do that.

So, she suggests that no matter how much suffering and harm there is around us, we take time to embrace the moments of beauty and delight that come to us as gifts — the cream-colored okra flowers unfurling in the garden, the bald eagle swooping, the gratuitous loveliness of the world, dare we say the wine at a wedding feast?! To do so is an act of faith. For God is present in each of these moments, in every part of creation. Embracing the joy God extends is as much a part of our calling as is addressing suffering and injustice. But not only this, embracing joy is the way we find the strength to continue the work of justice and healing.

Huska puts it like this. "Feasting can be as much a discipline as fasting, especially in times when we find little to celebrate. For the intense work ahead, this practice is not optional, but necessary."

Sam and Melody Harrell, CBF missions leaders who grew up in Kenya and Uganda respectively and have spoken here many times, have embraced this concept passionately as long as I have known them. When taking groups to partner with them in Kenya, including one from our church, I have always found that while we spend most of our time with people in great need in the cities and remote rural areas, we always spend some time taking in the vast beauty of Sub-Saharan Africa in the national parks and just along the way. As I have talked with Sam and Mel over the years, they have named several reasons why they have us do this.

Africa is defined as much by its majestic beauty and the resilience of its people as it is by suffering and hardship. We must not overlook these things. There is also a connection between urban poverty and rural poverty, destruction of the land and excessive migration to the city. But on a more personal level, Sam has told me that the only way he can continue desperately needed ministry among the poor, in places like the Kibera slum in Nairobi, is by making time to embrace the majestic wonder of creation — the bee-eaters and eagles, the leopards and gazelles, the jacarandas and baobabs. It is a way of finding energy, joy and a reason to persevere.

We all need this kind of feasting and joy wherever we can find it. Perhaps this is what Jesus is up to with his first miracle. The gift of joy is no small matter — the joy of a wedding feast, the wonder of marital love; the joy of creation, the majesty of all that God has made; the joy of discipleship, fulfillment in service.

Perhaps it's not such a strange miracle after all. The fact the Jesus has the water which becomes wine placed in jars used for Jewish purification rites suggests a symbolic dimension to this story. John says this miracle is Jesus' first sign, it points to something. Jesus is the new wine of purification, and with this wine, there is joy, incomparable joy!