

March 15th: Drama At The Table

Welcome once again to our Lenten series, At The Table–this is a time of year when Christians around the globe focus on spiritual renewal, repentance, and growing in our faith. This year, we’re not asking you to give up anything–we’re asking you to consider adding something to your life. That could be daily prayer, weekly devotions, trying a new form of community service, or whatever else adds fresh insight and depth to your journey. One powerful thing that you can add to your routines is more time at the table–more time with family and friends gathered around food you love and love to share.

Before we jump in, let’s pray.

Generous God, you provided for the ancient wedding guests with a display of extravagant abundance, you provided more than enough to continue the celebration. Through your miracle of turning water into wine, you demonstrated divine creativity and care–marking this occasion as one where all guests were invited into joyous community. This morning we come to experience the fullness of your presence, so that we might be filled with the refreshment that you have to offer. Amen.

If you’ve ever hosted a party, you know that there is significant planning and sometimes even stress involved–right? The experienced hosts and hostesses among us know that it might sound simple at first, but the logistics of how much food to buy, how much to prepare, and when to serve what is a dance that requires a lot of skill and effort. You have to consider questions like: what if people are extra hungry? What if someone has travelled a long distance and is more thirsty than normal? How many snacks should you provide for a certain number of people? How much time should you schedule for each course of the meal? It sometimes feels like a gamble–there’s no way to know how things will turn out.

In the best case scenario, there’s lots of leftovers–which as far as problems go, is a good problem to have. And there’s always the worst case scenario: the

party gets going and suddenly, there's not enough—you run out of something important, or there's confusion about who can eat what, or someone goes home hungry.

I've had a small insight into this type of situation recently thanks to my younger brother's wedding—he's getting married this weekend—yes THIS FRIDAY—and his future father in law is a professional caterer, so the pressure was on for this reception to be up to the family's standards. Between picking a bunch of appetizers for the cocktail hour, narrowing it down to a few choices for dinner, and debating about the need for an open bar, it was a lot of decisions to make. Weddings in general are A LOT, but thankfully, between the culinary professionals in his fiance's family and at the team at the venue, they were able to build a menu that suited everyone's preferences while having a firm grasp on things like food sensitivities, dietary restrictions, and having extra just in case.

But as you might expect, this was not always the case in the biblical world. For events like parties and weddings, some parts of the preparation process were similar, but a lot of the details looked quite a bit different.

For example, they didn't have a conveniently located Costco or a nearby Safeway stocked with everything they would need. They couldn't Doordash an item if they forgot it at the store. In Jesus' time, there were no Instacart shoppers or late night trips to Target. You started with what you could grow on your land. What was available in that particular growing or harvest season was what you could purchase at the local market. What animals were in your herds were what you could butcher. What you could fish in the local lake was what you could serve. What you had in your home or storehouse was what you could offer. And you had to make do with those options, all while staying on budget and managing your other household responsibilities.

As we heard in Pastor Heather's introduction to this series, hospitality was a core value in the ancient Near and Middle East—it was woven into the fabric of many different cultures and religious traditions. Abraham, in extending

hospitality to his three visitors, participated in an important social contract—this duty to feed and house guests was part of the expectations placed on him as a landowner and leader. If he ever traveled, and he did, he could expect that others would extend to him a similar level of safety and generosity. This built a sense of reciprocity and mutuality into biblical society—and being a good and thoughtful host was a way that people showed care and demonstrated responsibility. That means that providing a meal or planning a party was a serious undertaking, it was not entered into lightly.

And if at any point you ran out of whatever you were serving, it wasn't a sign that the party simply got too big, it was a cultural faux pas that could negatively impact your family's social standing and relationships with others. Your neighbors might judge you. Your community might whisper about you. Your extended family might complain to you. Plus, not having enough food or drink on hand was a problem more broadly—once the party was over, what would you eat for breakfast? Would you have enough for next week, next month, or even next year? What happened if you depleted your reserves but faced an emergency beyond your control? What would you do if resources suddenly became scarce?

Those are all real and important questions for our ancient friends to consider, as sadly, first century Palestine was intimately familiar with the reality of scarcity. During Jesus' time, his homeland was divided between a few city centers and large swaths of farmland—rolling hills covered in vineyards, fertile fields used to grow a large variety of crops, and most of the work of planting, harvesting, and storing done by day laborers. With this kind of agricultural society, there were plenty of times when food and drink was abundant, but there were also times when drought and famine struck. We have several stories in our Bible of times when God's people were forced to migrate to new places because of extended seasons of scarcity, and each time, there's a level of fear and uncertainty that lurks underneath those texts.

When we look at stories like this one in our Bible, we might not be aware that Jesus's economic and social reality was also one touched by consistent

famine—we have historical reports and modern data that show this area of the world suffered a shortage of food at least once every twenty years. That means if you were middle aged, you had survived at least one, if not two famines in your lifetime. And if you were elderly, it was possible that you have navigated as many as four of these tough seasons. In the century closest to Jesus' lifetime, we know that there were crop failures in 25/24 BCE, 38/39 CE, 45/46 CE, and a local famine in Jerusalem in 69 CE.¹ Miguel Escobar, author of "The Unjust Steward," writes, "The cultural memory of a season of severe hunger was never too far away, then...it is likely that Jesus himself, the writers of the gospels...and many in the first Christian assemblies struggled with getting enough to eat on a recurring basis."²

So that's the backdrop to this passage about a wedding in Cana, which was a small village in Galilee and far away from the relative wealth of the capital city. It's a story about celebration, but it's also a story about scarcity.

John's Gospel opens with John the Baptist's welcome of Jesus, and from there, Jesus and his new followers begin their journey. This passage comes right at the start of chapter 2, before any of Jesus' public ministry begins. It's not that he's in hiding, or being purposely secretive, but he hasn't started preaching or teaching yet—he's still a little incognito. He arrives at the wedding with his mother and a few of his friends, and in verse 3, we get the first hint of drama. It says, "When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, 'They have no more wine.'"

Uh oh!

At first, Jesus responds to his mother by arguing, "Woman, why do you involve me?...My hour has not yet come." Still, Mary goes to the host's servants and involves them too—you can see how the circle of drama is getting bigger and bigger as more and more people become aware of this situation.

1

² Escobar, *The Unjust Steward*, 22-24.

Whenever I think of this story and try to picture these events, I always think of a specific meme–this one right here, known on the internet as “Woman Yelling at a Cat.” If you’ve never seen this before, it’s a juxtaposition of two images–the one on the left from a confrontational scene in *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, specifically an episode called “Malibu Beach Party from Hell,” and the one on the right is a photo of a cat named Smudge seated at a dinner table, clearly not enjoying his vegetables. It’s dramatic, it’s absurd, and I can’t help but laugh every time I look at it.

I’m not saying this is strictly biblically accurate, but in my imagined version of John 2, there’s a lot of finger pointing going around as the party attendees try to figure out who is going to be responsible for solving this wine crisis. Again, you can’t just run to Costco, and someone has to come up with a solution. Mary may not be a *Real Housewife of Beverly Hills* in the middle of a drama filled beach party, but in my mental picture, she points at Jesus, and Jesus is just sitting there confused, trying to eat his salad like a good guest. He’s minding his own business, wondering why everybody has turned to look at him.

And he is a guest–he’s not in charge here, these are not his servants! Why should Jesus be expected to fix this situation? Why is Mary trying to make this problem his problem to solve? Where are the hosts and why are they not dealing with this? Can’t he just enjoy a nice party without some drama?

Nevertheless, we see that Jesus does in fact step in as his mother asked. Perhaps he finally feels like his time has come. Maybe he realizes that no one else is capable of resolving this issue. Or maybe he’s just thirsty! In verse 7, Jesus instructs the servants to fill ceremonial jugs to the brim with water, and when liquid is drawn out and served, the servants and the master of the banquet taste fine wine instead. And suddenly, there’s plenty of wine–up to 180 gallons. In modern measurements, that’s approximately 900 standard bottles, or 75 cases of wine.

The master of the banquet and the groom–two people who probably should have been the ones to solve this problem–are delighted by this turn of events,

the behind the scenes drama has somehow turned the wedding into an even bigger celebration. The master of the banquet even says to the groom, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.” That means the party is just getting started! It’s about to get WILD!

Here’s two important things to note about this–

Number one: Jesus’ miracle allows the wedding host to save face in a culture that would have judged them for falling short. He steps in to provide the hospitality that was lacking to prevent them from being embarrassed in front of their closest family, friends, and neighbors. It’s a gift of grace that sees the value in protecting his host’s reputation and allowing the celebration to continue. Jesus shifts the focus away from them and onto these new jars of fine wine–acting like this was always the plan. No more drama. No more stress.

And number two: Jesus’ miracle turns scarcity into extravagant abundance. Jesus doesn’t provide just enough, he provides more than enough. This is not just a physical resolution to the problem of not having the necessary supplies, it’s a spiritual solution as well. The feelings of scarcity that might have been in the back of guests minds or part of their lived experience are turned into sheer joy and awe. That reality of famine and hunger and fighting for survival is replaced by a celebration that isn’t bound by human limitations or the capacity of local agriculture. In this moment, Jesus offers them a reprieve from the looming natural disasters and worries of the next harvest season. The host and his guests can just relax and be present.

Think of it this way–if you’ve ever run out of money before your next payday, and you’ve experienced the anxiety and uncertainty of having that gap in your resources, imagine how amazing it would feel to have the money for next month’s bills set aside in a savings account. Think of the relief that you might feel to know that you don’t have to be living in perpetual scarcity. Think of the safety that you might feel knowing that you can put those worries aside. Think

of your ability to enjoy everyday moments without the threat of an emergency hanging over your head.

That's the kind of spiritual flourishing that Jesus provides in this passage. That's the kind of relief that his miracle offers. Like the prophetic table from Isaiah that we learned about last week, this wedding table answers both a physical need and an emotional one. It provides a necessary ingredient to enhance the celebration, and it soothes a very real and tangible vulnerability.

So here's what I think we should take away from this story as we continue our observance of Lent and this practice of adding hospitality into our spiritual journeys.

Scarcity is still a legitimate concern in our modern world—we have plenty of examples of people and communities that are facing situations where there simply isn't enough right now. There's not enough money, not enough food, not enough resources, not enough jobs—and that weighs heavily on so many of our neighbors, or even ourselves. And even in situations where there might be enough, we can develop these scarcity mindsets—some of us might be always waiting for the next big recession, or expecting the worst case scenario to happen. And this scarcity mindset can have profound effects on our spiritual lives, because it will trap us in this mental state of worry that can exhaust our ability to give and receive hospitality. All of us want to be good guests and good hosts, so it's important that we don't let real or perceived scarcity keep us from following Jesus' example.

We see in this story that Jesus' actions lead us into greater celebration, his miracle brings us deeper into community and deeper into joy. So our task as his disciples is to imitate this practice—we should be focusing on how we can lead others into that same sense of celebration, community and joy. No drama, no stress, just the opportunity to enjoy being together.

And my friends, it doesn't have to take a miracle—it can simply be sharing our resources with compassion, or making room for more friends, or creating

moments of joyful connection. It doesn't have to be 900 bottles of wine, it can be a welcoming smile, an invitation to a simple meal, or dropping off soup for someone who is sick. All of those actions can remind ourselves and each other that Jesus has provided more than is needed, and he's inviting you to the table.

Amen.