

**“Hidden Bouquet”**

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John 2: 1-11

**2** On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, <sup>2</sup> and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. <sup>3</sup> When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, “They have no more wine.”

<sup>4</sup> “Woman,<sup>[a]</sup> why do you involve me?” Jesus replied. “My hour has not yet come.”

<sup>5</sup> His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

<sup>6</sup> Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so, they filled them to the brim.

<sup>8</sup> Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.”

They did so, <sup>9</sup> and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside <sup>10</sup> and said, “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.”

<sup>11</sup> What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

**Hidden Bouquet**

At first glance, you might think this story is about Jesus' first miracle. Or maybe it's about wine. Those answers are certainly not wrong. But, those choices are not the main story behind the scenes.

There's much more to it.

Several years ago, decades actually, my wife and I attended a wedding reception that was being held for a young couple from my place of work. The wedding was beautiful, the bride and groom were very nervous, and the reception provided a place to relax and have fun. Until they decided it was time to cut the cake. For some people, cutting the cake is the pivotal event of the reception.

But the bakery had been in a rush that week and the cake had been made ahead of time. How do you keep a wedding cake from spoiling until it can be delivered? You freeze it.

The lovely young bride, her hands slightly shaking, and her new husband, with tiny drops of sweat on his forehead, took the knife together and gently laid the blade into the icing. And there it stopped. They looked at each other and shrugged. They pushed a bit harder and it was as though the cake were made of concrete.

Try as they may, they could not cut this frozen cake! Fortunately, they both had a sense of humor that lay beneath the nervous exterior and both burst out laughing. The knife became a meat cleaver as they hacked their way into it. The band struck up a lively tune in time with the knife hacking. The crowd clapped and roared. And the cake cutting was postponed for 30 minutes.

How fortunate it was that this young couple knew that the joy of the day was in the union of their lives, not in the cutting of the cake. For a moment, however, it was a significant social faux pas.

So, let's talk about weddings in the time of Jesus. The first few words of today's reading can be misleading. 'On the third day' it says. Jewish law says that the marriage of a virgin should take place on a Wednesday, the third day of the week. If you read about weddings in that time and place, you would know that couples did not have a honeymoon, they had a wedding feast and it lasted seven days. After the ceremony on the first day, they were escorted to their new home and were treated like royalty.

We don't know whose wedding it was but apparently Jesus and his mother had been invited there. Commentaries tell us that Jesus showed up with five disciples. I doubt they had a significant impact on the wine

consumption. One of the Coptic gospels that did not make it into our bible tells us that Mary was the sister of the bridegroom's mother and that Mary had a part in planning the festivities. That would make sense when we see that she was concerned about the wine running out and she told the hired help to 'Do whatever Jesus tells you.' She had some responsibility and authority over the feast. Apparently, the wedding was at the home of Nathaniel in Cana, not far from Capernaum or Nazareth. Something else to bear in mind for later reference, Jesus had already encountered John the Baptist at the River Jordan and for most of us, we consider that to be the starting point of his ministry.

But here he is, faced with this social dilemma, his mother looking at him as only mothers can do, and it's not even his wedding! But if you put yourself into these verses, you might believe that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is not so naïve as to not know what her son is all about. She basically asks Jesus to do something about the problem. The hospitality of the host was at stake and hospitality carried great value in that culture; a sacred duty, in fact.

Some may think that Jesus' response was rude by addressing his mother as 'woman.' Actually, the Greek translation is not rude at all. In the proper context, he was referring to Mary as, 'My lady.' As for the next words, the King James Version states verse 4 as, "What have I to do with thee?" In the time and culture of Jesus' day, the meaning of that phrase depended on the tone in which it was spoken. It could be a harsh response, but in speaking to his mother, Jesus meant 'Don't worry, leave it to me.'

The rest of his response is that his *time* had not yet come.

When he said his time had not come, or in the KJV, his *hour* had not come, was he referring to his path to the cross? We're not sure. It is a safe bet he knew about the cross because Psalm 22 mentions pierced hands and feet; Jesus quotes Psalm 22 from the cross.

Perhaps Jesus was assessing the situation. When Mary tried to prod him into action, maybe Jesus was trying to gather his wits about him. If that's what it was, I guess I would not have used his words about my time not coming yet; I would have said, "Hang on a minute. I have to do this right." Most scholars will tell us that Jesus was simply not ready to take that first

step into his ministry. It's likely that Mary knew he was going to do something because she told the others to do whatever Jesus told them to do. She wasn't sure what it would be, but she knew something would happen.

Mothers always know!

Jesus had just selected certain disciples and they were watching. Here was his chance to give them a taste of who he really was. The last verse of today's reading says they put their faith in him. It was also the first example of the Messianic secret. How many times did he perform the miracle of healing and ask that no one be told? In this case, only the disciples knew. Jesus had a strong sense of timing. Maybe the Messianic secret was what he was referring to.

I admit, much of what I have said so far contains a bit of speculation because it comes from sources outside of our scripture reading. But there is one thing that is certain. The seven days of a wedding feast were days of sheer joy. It was not a party of excessive indulgences, for drunkenness was looked upon with disfavor in those days. But, the wine was a necessary element in it. In the OT, wine is mentioned as a drink offering. It was considered as something of value because it was commonly served with meals, usually mixed with water. It was a symbol of peace and prosperity. A wedding without it would be like a worship service here without music and prayer; a ball game without the National Anthem; July 4<sup>th</sup> without a parade and fireworks. It just couldn't happen that way because the joy would be gone.

Speaking of joy, there are Christian groups who do not see the value of joy in one's life. Some call them 'Bible Thumpers.' Their perspective of worshipping God is that we should be somber and sour. They belong to the church of "Thou shalt not!" Frankly, I think they cannot tell the difference between joy and sin, so they just prohibit everything! To them, joy means something must be wrong. According to the *NIV Exhaustive Concordance*, words like 'Joy,' 'Joyous,' and 'Joyful' appear in the bible over 300 times. The prophets, Joel and Amos, use wine as a joyous sign of the arrival of God's new age.

That's what today's scripture is about – joy.

When we see joy in others we instinctively ask the question, 'Why?' Why are these people joyful? How could I have the same feeling? What do they know that I don't know?

And Jesus rescues the joy of the wedding with a simple request. He says, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." The head steward did not know where the wine came from. He thought the host was holding back and saving the best until last. I'm sure he savored the bouquet of the wine, the aftertaste that greets your palate like a warm embrace and stays with you for several moments. This statement by the head steward has often been used as an analogy to the Kingdom of God in which the best comes last.

Practically everything in this story has symbolism, even the six jars of water. In the bible, the number seven is considered a perfect number. How often do we hear that number? But, here we have six, an imperfect number. It is said that the six jars represented the laws of the Jews, which were far from perfect. Jesus fulfilled the laws and made them the perfection of grace.

It was a humble home in a small Galilean village. Here, the Son of God chose to first reveal His majesty and power. The joy of the wedding was preserved and allowed to continue.

His presence alone made the difference.  
Jesus celebrated people; he was a people person.

In our lives, like the number six, we are like an imperfect number. Jesus comes into our lives like we are the water, and we are forever changed. Christian life was never said to be easy. But, it is the ultimate contradiction in that the hard work is upheld by underlying joy. It is a two-edged sword of pain and joy. The bouquet of life is there if you are patient.

Somewhere I read a list of things one should know about Christianity before becoming a Christian.

First, it's hard.

There's a dangerous tendency to sugarcoat the Christian life and sell it as an easy, joyous, successful and wonderful alternative to the "secular" existence.

The Christian faith will surely have its blissful moments, but much of it requires and demands service, sacrifice, dedication, humility, patience, forgiveness, mercy, compassion and work—the things that show Christ-like love. Not only is this not easy, it's usually hard.

Following Jesus can be messy and requires an amount of time, energy, effort and grace.

Christianity is often perceived as an escape mechanism, a crutch, a way to easily avoid the harsh realities of life, but actually it's the exact opposite—it's a journey that embraces truth and confronts the world in brave, honest and often painfully difficult ways. Prepare yourself for not just the good, but also the bad—and sometimes the ugly.

Yes, it's hard. It's the joy of a challenge.

Next on the list, it doesn't fix everything.

After hearing miraculous testimonies about lives transformed and being inundated with the Biblical stories of redemption, hope and reconciliation—expectations about Christianity can be pretty high.

Yes, God does amazing and unexplainable things, but eventually you'll realize that Christianity won't solve all your problems.

Sicknesses don't always go away. Broken relationships don't always get better. Your income may not improve. In short, troubles don't just disappear. Try explaining that to someone who has doubts.

The Christian faith is more about creating a relationship with God than finding a magic button to all of life's difficulties. Unfortunately, many treat Christianity as a spiritual formula to get what they want. When the

inevitable disappointment arrives, it brings feelings of betrayal, cynicism, disappointment and anger. Many people abandon “Christianity” altogether because it didn’t meet their preconceived expectations.

Where’s the joy here? The joy of faith.

This next one on the list gets a lot of people: You won’t have all the answers.

The Gospel is often presented as the answer to all of life’s deepest questions, and it *does* give purpose and meaning to our lives, but Christianity doesn’t completely eradicate doubts, settle intellectual struggles and explain philosophical inquiries. In fact, it often brings up even more questions than answers.

Biblical content is debated by thousands of pastors, theologians and believers, and each doctrine is associated with hundreds of theories, ideas and traditions. If you’re looking for decisive, conclusive, and indisputable facts, Christianity will offer some, but ultimately, it’s about finding God—and once you find Him, the evidence will speak for itself.

It’s the joy of discovery.

The one on this list that I like the most is that you never stop learning and changing.

Your faith will change. Life happens. Frederick Beuchner says we should listen to our life. For example, we grow older, get a job, meet new people, travel, understand new cultures, fall in love, get married, have kids and experience thousands of different moments that ultimately shape and influence the way we think about God.

My theology is different now than when I was in elementary school, and it changed in junior high, and after high school, and during college and when I become an adult.

We often treat our faith as if it’s something static, immovable and permanent. God is eternally unchanging, but our faith isn’t. We see this

throughout the Bible, as the Israelites—and even the disciples in the New Testament—had their understanding of God change as different occurrences and events happened to them. Our faith is a “Pilgrim’s Progress” involving ups and downs and numerous changes. Many believers fearfully avoid change and see it as some sort of sin—and you can certainly go from a good belief to a bad belief—but the concept of change itself shouldn’t be avoided, especially since it’s at the very heart of Jesus’ teachings.

That’s the joy of adventure.

Finally, you’ll still make mistakes.

The most dangerous and self-righteous people are those who think they’re incapable of doing anything wrong and who never admit mistakes.

To be human is to blunder. Christianity doesn’t change that. You’ll still fail, stumble and make horrible decisions, but the difference is that you’ll have the reassurance of God’s grace, mercy and love.

The joy of grace is always there.

Today, tomorrow, and in the end, there will be life abundant, there will be joy. The joy of hope. Just like the wedding in Cana, Christ will make sure of that.

**AMEN**