

The Devil is in the Details

John 2:1-11

This coming weekend is our daughter's wedding. Even though things may not have happened in the order she or we would have desired, life goes on and the wedding is about to happen. It is a busy and exciting time. Now, I have gone through weddings several times as the presiding minister. In my career I have orchestrated well over 600 weddings. The large majority of them went extremely well with only a handful of weddings with significant enough issues to be noticed by most in attendance. There is often a lot that goes on prior to and following a wedding that I could talk about, but I won't and never will. Let's just say that weddings are wonderful, but often challenging, events.

This coming weekend I will take on a new role as the father of the bride. I have been the father of the groom before and I presided at that wedding. It was a major production with several things that could have gone awry. From the full pipe and drum band marching in before the bride to the several Nashville musicians singing and playing for the service, there was much that could have gone wrong. This was a good wedding to be the father of the groom and not the bride because large and formal southern weddings need to go perfectly or else! The or else is something none of us want to know or experience. That is one reason that I love being back in the Midwest. People don't seem to get as uptight about the wedding being an event that will either affirm the family's status or rend it fatally wounded. If you think I am kidding here you haven't lived in the south and worked within the wealthier, historic, and proper parts of it. In the south the devil is in the detail and if you get it wrong there are consequences. Fortunately for me I never presided over a wedding that went tragically bad, but was very aware of them when it happened elsewhere.

I guess this is where my Midwestern background comes through. The wedding is about two people publically announcing their love for each other and inviting their family and friends to witness their commitment to each other. Beyond this, the rest is detail. This is how I see it...but then again, what do I know, I am only a man! Fortunately for Barb and me, Leah seems to have the same sense about things. It will be a nice wedding, but not over the top, and if something goes awry, we will all laugh about it and move on. What else can you do?

That is why I have always found this story in John so fascinating. Let's look at what is happening. A wedding has occurred. It is a wonderful affair with family and friends in attendance. As far as we know it was a traditional Jewish wedding, blessed by the church and God. When we pick up this story we are at the reception. The groom's family was in charge of the meal and drinks. Mary was there and so were Jesus and his disciples. It was early in their ministry and a time for partying and enjoying each other's company.

It appears as if things had been going on for awhile because all of the wine was gone. Now, this raises a couple of issues. Either the family had

underestimated the crowd that would be attending, or the people were really having a good time. A good reminder for not sponsoring an open bar at the reception. Whatever caused it to happen, everything else appears to be going well but the lack of wine seems to be a major problem and when Mary, the mother of Jesus, becomes aware of it, she asks him to step in. Now let's put this in context. Jesus is hanging out with his disciples enjoying himself, probably helping reduce the wine inventory, and his mother is standing there looking at him expecting him to do something about it. His response to his mom is classic. In effect he says, "Mom, what do you want me to do about this? It isn't my issue." She responds, "Do whatever the host asks you to do to help." Remember, he had not done a public miracle that we are aware of up to this point. Maybe he had done some things at home, in private, that Mary had observed which brought her to request this of him. We don't know this. Maybe she was not asking for a miracle, maybe she wanted him to gather up a group of guys to go make a wine run. We simply don't know for sure. But we do know that Jesus responds to her request. And not only does he create a lot more wine from water, but it is good wine...better than that served by the host.

We have heard this story many, many times. But have you ever stopped to think about it? The Son of God came to the world to teach us how to love and how to live lives of faith, and the first out of the box thing he does to show his power is to produce wine for a wedding. He doesn't heal someone or inspire someone. He doesn't feed a hungry mass or comfort a hurting person. His first miracle is making wine. Doesn't that seem odd to you? It does to me.

The first miracle Jesus performs doesn't change a life or heal a heart, it is to save the host from embarrassment. Doesn't this seem like a pretty petty thing to do with your first miracle? It's like getting three wishes and using your first for paper and pencil so that you can make out your prior list for the other two. Jesus' first miracle, one encouraged by his mother, was to keep the party rolling. Now maybe this was a cultural thing. Maybe Mary had a feeling of how tragic this would be for the family to not live up to their responsibility as hosts. Maybe Mary was trying to protect her friends and Jesus was her go to guy to make it right. We don't know. What we do know is that Jesus uses his power, given to him by God, to change the world and make things right, to make more wine for a party. This is starting to sound like a big southern wedding to me.

With this in mind I am beginning to figure out why so many of us think that we can request our own miracles as we deal with the little inconveniences of life. Have you ever found yourself praying for your team to win? Have you ever asked God for good weather so that you can successfully pull off your outdoor event? Have you ever created a list of things to ask for, that you certainly could have lived without, but which would have made your life a little better, a little more complete? At one point or another I think we have all fallen into that trap. So maybe I won't get what I want, but if I don't ask....

It seems to me that if we look at Mary's request of Jesus to make wine out of water, then maybe our little convenience requests are not that far out of line.

Maybe not? But I would hate to think that with all of the world's problems and tragedies, somehow we have gotten to the point that we think God owes us answers to prayers which make our life less complicated or a little easier.

When I was younger used to prayer prayers of convenience. God if you do this for me then that would be great! If it happened, wonderful, if not, well I got over it. It was much easier for me to pray for the things that I wanted God to do for me then it was to ask God to use me as I was needed to accomplish God's desire for the world. I often recited the Lord's Prayer, but rarely did I think about the part where I said "Thy will be done..." "Thy will be done" seems to be an open invitation for God to do what God thinks is best, whether it brings me what I think I need or not. In fact, "Thy will be done," can take a pretty interesting turn when we are stretched by God to do something we aren't comfortable with or even interested in doing. This kind of prayer is risky and could easily get away from us. What if God determines to perform a miracle in someone else's life and we are to play a role in making it happen? And what if we do this and get nothing in return for our efforts other than the satisfaction that we were faithful? What if?

At the end of the day most of us want our lives to be well controlled and our concerns easily identified. We want God in our pocket doing the things we need God to do. When we need a miracle or a favor, we want a God who will do it for us, and to do it quickly and in the form and fashion we request. Isn't that why we go to church? Isn't that why we give our money? So that God owes us?

In our weak times we may think this...but in our faithful times we know better. We are on this earth not to control God or to use God as our personal assistant, we are on this earth to serve God and to be vehicles for his love to all corners of the globe. There are certainly times when we are at the end of our ability and losing hope when prayers for God's assistance are not only required but absolutely needed. But too often our prayer life is devoid of those on our knees prayers, and is filled with our petty wish lists for God to complete. We are principally here on this earth to be stretched, to be challenged, to be servants, not masters. And until we figure this out then we will be frustrated people who are constantly being disappointed by a God we think is either uncaring or deaf to the needs of the world. And God is neither.

Too often we relegate God to the details of life while we attempt to control those things most important to us. Kind of like making God responsible for the details of the wedding while we keep the best parts to ourselves.

Jesus' first miracle was to save the host of the wedding from embarrassment. It was a kind thing to do, but not really the type of miracle we should expect from the Son of God. The Devil may be in the details, but we need to let God have the best parts...our heart and soul.