



LIFE OF THE PARTY



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John 2:1-12
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Most cultures have a way to celebrate the moment. Maybe you go off into the woods and hunt your first wild animal. Maybe you have a party celebrating the fact that you are eligible to be married. Maybe you sit behind the wheel of a car in a parking lot with a very anxious parent.

It's that time in life when you go from being a kid to being an adult. We often call it "coming of age." We love to tell stories about this moment. Movies. Books. Songs. We like to talk about that moment when everything changes. Maybe because when it happens, it's hard to pinpoint it. So we zoom in on it and tell stories about it.

This moment fascinates us because it's actually a very scary idea. There is something comfortable about childhood. Something safe. Something fun. Adulthood means responsibilities. It means making good decisions. For a lot of people, adulthood doesn't sound like fun.

I took a year off between high school and college and traveled with a musical ministry team for a year. We toured all around the middle of the US. And I distinctly remember one moment when I had returned earlier than the rest of my team members. I was 18 years old. I was driving our 15 passenger van with its double-axle trailer through downtown Minneapolis on my way to the airport to pick them up. And I remember thinking, "How did I get here?" I used to be a kid. Now I have all this responsibility. Am I really ready for this?

And yet there comes a moment when things change. There comes a moment when you make that transition. You come of age. The question is: what will coming of age bring?

This morning we're continuing our series looking through the Gospel of John entitled *Signs of Life*. We're taking ten months to work through this incredible book and really immerse ourselves into the life of Jesus. John presents Jesus as the source of life and his strategy is to use signs to point that out to his readers.

We've seen the grand cosmic introduction of Jesus as the pre-existent Word. We've seen John the Baptist come and prepare the way for the king. We've seen Jesus start to build his kingdom by starting with a few followers. And this morning we see what John refers to as the first of Jesus' signs. The story we are looking at this morning is the unveiling of the ministry of Jesus.

At its heart, this story is a coming of age story. When the story begins, it is actually more about Jesus' mom than about him. He is clearly under her authority. But as the story unfolds, he emerges out from under his mother's shadow and comes into his own. After this story, we don't hear about Jesus' mother again until she stands at the foot of the cross watching her son die. This story is about Jesus kicking off his ministry, but it's also about a young man and his mother.

And that's why this is one of my favorite stories about Jesus. It's so incredibly true-to-life—shockingly so, in fact. Seeing how Jesus and his mother relate is remarkable and a bit funny too. It's funny because every single one of us in this room has a mother. Most of us have relationships with our mothers. And if we started comparing notes, I'm willing to bet we'd find a lot of similarities. I think when we read this story about Jesus and his mother; we'll be shocked at how realistic it is. Here's my summary of this story: The creator of the Universe has an argument with his mom ... and loses.

I'd like to make two caveats as we begin this message though. First, I'm just really grateful that I don't have to preach this message on Mother's Day. The way I read it, this story doesn't present Jesus' mother in the best light. I think it plays on some foibles that mothers tend toward. I'll poke fun at that a little as we walk through the story. But let me assure you, that I'm incredibly grateful for my own mother and have incredible respect for motherhood in general.

Second, and related to that, is that the way I walk us through this story may seem a bit irreverent. Again, that's purposeful. I think the story is a bit irreverent, but we don't always see that because we aren't familiar with the culture. This story unveils Jesus' ministry in a surprising way.

Especially after John starts off his gospel in such a dramatic and cosmic way, we might expect Jesus to kick off his ministry with a lot of fanfare. But this story describes it happening at a party and actually as a kind of accident. Jesus doesn't unveil a new religious system. He brings wine to a party. Jesus becomes the life of the party.

But John is doing something incredible here. Even though he is telling us a very down-to-earth story, he hasn't stopped making grand theological observations. As he shows us Jesus coming of age, he is also making the point that the world is coming of age. Something is

changing. There is something new. God's plan has entered a new phase.

But it isn't what we'd expect. It isn't a new religious program. It isn't another spiritual teacher. This phase is about life. This morning, as Jesus comes of age, we find out what kind of life he brings. He doesn't just bring life in a stark religious sense. He brings real life; the kind of life that we know; the kind of life that we want; and that we're familiar with. Jesus is the life of the party.

And so as we see Jesus coming of age, we'll have to ask ourselves, "What does it mean for us to grow up spiritually?" What kind of life will we find when we get there? What kind of religion does Jesus bring us? What kind of life are we talking about? As we ask these questions, we will see our categories challenged. Jesus comes of age and brings a new message to the world. But it is the message that everyone wants to hear. It's a message about a party and life and joy.

Background

Our story begins with a wedding. Here are the first two verses.

John 2:1-2:

¹On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. This is the setting for our story. They provide the background.

Remember that John is a master at using words and phrases with double meaning. So it's probably not a mistake that John says this event takes place on the third day. It's a bit of an awkward time reference. The third day after what? Why give us this detail. Unless of course, John is calling our attention to another sign—the final sign recorded in his gospel—that happened on a third day. It's as if John wants the resurrection of Jesus to be in the back of our minds the whole time we are reading this story.

So it happened on the third day that there was a wedding and Jesus' mom was there. Notice that Jesus' mother is mentioned first and almost as a side note, it is said that Jesus and his disciples were there. This indicates that this wedding probably started on the social calendar of Jesus' mother. She was invited and because of that, he and his disciples were too.

This is the first detail that is so down-to-earth. How many of us have been dragged along to some social event that our mother has gone to? As a child, your social life often begins by revolving around your parents. And that can sometimes be really frustrating.

I remember as a kid my family would always be the last ones to leave church and I would get so impatient for my parents to be ready to leave. When can we go home? Now, I hear the exact same words from my kids. The other day one of my kids asked me, "Dad, why do adults like to talk so much?" We know what it is like to follow our mother or father into some social setting.

That's what happens to Jesus here. It's nice that this happens to Jesus because it means he knows about us. He really was human. He lived our lives. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is dragged to a party by his mom. That is incredible. But the story continues.

Argument with Mom

As we continue reading, we are introduced to the main conflict in the story. Jesus has come to this party for his mom's sake and now there is a conflict between Jesus and his mom. If you're not comfortable saying that Jesus had an argument with his mom, then you can think of it as a "serious discussion."

John 2:3-5:

³When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." ⁵His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

This is where we get the action of our story. In Greek narrative, it's the dialog that drives the story forward and we have a lot of it here. It's mostly very short and to the point: a quick back and forth between Jesus and his mom. I find this interchange incredible.

They are at this party and the wine runs out. This is a big deal—a super big deal. A wedding is the capstone event that a family puts on. It has huge implications for the reputation of the family in the community. For the wine to run out is a huge oversight of the host. There is even the possibility that guests can bring legal action against the host if the party isn't up to standards. It's possible that the host could get sued if the wine runs out and the party is ruined.

So the wine runs out and Jesus' mom decides that she's going to get involved in the situation. She comes up to Jesus and says simply, "They have no wine." This is classic. I can almost hear my own mother saying these words. I would know that she isn't just informing me of a situation. There's no request in these words. She doesn't say Jesus is supposed to do anything about it. But there is thirty years' worth of mothering behind those words and the implication is crystal clear. There's no more wine and I think you should do something about it.

Jesus understands perfectly. He knows that she is asking him to do something. But he says no. And he gives two reasons—two very good reasons.

First of all, he says that it isn't really his problem. "Woman, what does this have to do with me?" Now, this sounds kind of rude in English, but it's not really as abrupt as it sounds. Some translations have "dear woman" which is probably a better translation because the word he uses to address his mother is a kind word. Calling my mother "woman" would never work in my family. But Jesus isn't being rude at all. He's simply saying that this isn't his problem. He has nothing to do with the wine situation of this host.

But his second reason is the biggie. In my house, we sometimes talk about someone playing a card to get what they want. When my wife was pregnant, she could always play the pregnant card. "Would you go get some donuts? I am carrying our child after all ..."

Then of course when our kids were young, she could play the "nursing card." She recently had surgery and played that card for a while. I came down with pneumonia a few years ago and I was kind of happy because finally I had a card to play.

Well, here Jesus plays the biggest card there is. It's like the triple ace of trump. He says "My hour has not yet come." Throughout the gospel of John, references are made to this hour. In general, it refers to the plan of salvation that Jesus has come to fulfill. In particular it seems to refer to his death and resurrection.

As I understand it, what Jesus is saying is that the time isn't right for him to do anything. He's saying that the plan of salvation for the eternal pre-existent Logos to step into humanity and redeem the brokenness of sin isn't ready to start yet.

That's pretty much the biggest card you can play. "My hour has not yet come." Would you argue with that? If Jesus said that to you, would you try to change his mind? I wouldn't. That's why what comes next is so unbelievable.

Jesus' mom has asked him to intervene and he has given two reasons why he shouldn't. First: it's not his problem. Second: God's eternal plan for salvation hasn't reached the right stage yet.

The first reason is a pretty good one. The second one is rock-solid. So what does Jesus' mom say to those reasons? Nothing. She completely ignores them. In fact, she completely ignores Jesus and addresses the servants. "Do whatever he tells you to do." She asked him to intervene. He said no. It's almost as if she didn't even hear him say no. She just assumed that he was going to do what she wanted him to do. So she tells the servants to do what he

tells them.

Let this sink in for a moment. Jesus has played the biggest, most theological card there is. And his mother ignored it. Can you believe it?

I'm really surprised by the way that Jesus' mom interacts with him, but it's really freeing as well. It reminds me of some of the Old Testament stories when Moses bargains with God. It reminds me of the way that David talks to God in some of the Psalms. It's not like we talk to God in church at times. It doesn't sound religious. It's not super-spiritual. It's real and plain and every-day.

This is a helpful picture for us. We live our lives down here. We get tired and grumpy and our moods change and all sorts of stuff. We think this way even if we don't always talk this way in church. When we try to hide all that stuff behind a spiritual façade, we do the opposite of what God does. He enters into all that stuff. He comes down to earth. He doesn't require us to come up to him. He comes down to us.

And yet the mystery is that as Jesus enters our experience, he opens up something new for us because this is the moment when Jesus comes of age. This is the turning point. This is when he grows up. After this scene, Jesus' mother is mentioned once only briefly before the end of the book. Her role is mostly past. From now on Jesus is on his own.

Most coming of age stories show the child throwing off the authority of a parent. Striking off on their own. But this story shows Jesus, doing what his mother has asked him to do. He ends up submitting to his mother and that's how he kicks off his ministry. He comes of age not by ignoring his mother, but by listening to her.

This is a different kind of story. At first, it is familiar. It's about a mother that drags her son to a party and then expects him to do something about a problem that has nothing to do with him.

But in this moment, when Jesus grows up, he does the opposite of what we'd expect. He's not rising above everything in a spiritual sense. He's coming down into the realities of life as a son on earth. That's the story that John is telling all throughout the beginning of his book. A story of a God who comes down into what we know – who experiences what we experience.

Jesus comes of age not by declaring his independence, but by submitting to his mother. By entering our experience, Jesus shows us that maturity isn't rising above; it's entering into. Jesus comes of age by entering our experience.

Back to the wedding. The wine ran out. Jesus' mom asked him to do something about it. He said no. She

ignored him and told the servants to do what he said.

Water Into Wine

The way Jesus' mom interacts with him is incredible to me. But what comes next is even more surprising. Here's how it plays out.

John 2:6-8:

“Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.^{fn} Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it.

It's incredible to me that Jesus' mom ignored his reasons for not wanting to get involved. But what's even more amazing is that Jesus goes ahead and helps out. Does anyone else find that incredible? He said that his hour hadn't come. He played the biggest card there was. His mother ignored it. And he adapts to her. He goes ahead and gets involved.

What are the implications of the fact that the timeline of the God of the universe for the salvation of mankind was altered by Jesus' pushy mother? What does that mean?

Well, for one, it means that we can have an effect on God. Jesus loved his mom. She raised him and sacrificed for him. They had a close relationship. So when she asks him for something—even if she didn't ask nicely—he adjusts things for her. He changes.

That means that perhaps God adjusts for us as well. As if it wasn't enough for God to send Jesus to earth to save mankind, he also adjusts his plans because his mom insists on it.

Does God really care for us in such small, minute ways as this? Does he really allow his plans to be changed? Can we really talk to him like that? Apparently so.

Are there things that you're afraid to ask God for? Things that you assume he's already figured out and couldn't possibly allow to be changed?

So Jesus takes action. And now we see the other level of what's going on here. On the one hand, there is this dynamic between Jesus and his mom. That's what we've focused on so far. But now things begin to shift. We don't hear about Mary for the rest of the story. Now something is happening that has great personal and theological significance.

Jesus starts by taking some stone water jars that were used for Jewish ceremonial washing. They were huge. Together they hold about 180 gallons. We just recently bought a Suburban for our large family and I'm pretty sure that's about the size of our gas tank. At least that's what it feels like based on how much it costs to fill it up.

Jesus is doing something intentional here. He starts with Jewish ceremonial pots. He starts with the old system. But he is doing something new. We don't know exactly what yet, but we know that it is God's plan 2.0. It is the next level; the new phase. As Jesus comes of age, we see God's plan come of age as well. We see the plan of salvation move into adulthood. And we find out that it isn't what we expected.

This is the climax of the story. Put yourself in the shoes of one of these servants. Jesus has told them to fill up the pots to the top. He tells them to draw out some water and take it to the master of the feast. Did the servants know that this was wine? Did they know if it was any good? This is a risky moment. If they served the butler water, they'd probably be fired.

If this were a TV movie, there would be a commercial break right here. It's a tense moment for everyone involved—for Jesus, his mom, the servants, the master of the feast, the bride and groom. Everyone has a little something at stake here. Depending on what happens next, the lives of each of these people are going to change.

For Jesus, this is where he comes of age; this is the moment that everything can change. It could be that there is still water in those jars. In that case, Jesus will be a fool, his mother will be humiliated, the groom will be disgraced, the servants will be fired, the butler will be furious, and the disciples will be disillusioned.

But, if it's more than water, if something happened, then everything will be different for everyone.

The Reaction

Let's see what happens.

John 2:9-10:

“When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

Everything about this situation has been so very plain

and ordinary so far. A wedding party. No more wine. A “serious conversation” between a grown son and his mother. Stone jars. Water from the well.

But then the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Water is turned into wine.

Notice that we aren’t even told that the water had become wine. We’re just told about what happened when the master of the feast tried it. It’s almost as if we skipped a verse.

I did a magic trick a few weeks ago as part of my sermon and I was sure to build the tension. I waved my magic wand. I drew out the moment and then, “Voila!” I made a flower appear. The moment was a big deal.

But the moment of water being turned into wine isn’t a big deal here at all. In fact, it’s completely passed over. It’s not even mentioned. I’ve always wondered when it happened. Was it when they put the water into the jar? Was all the water turned into wine at the same time; maybe after all six jars had been full? Or maybe it didn’t turn into wine until they dipped the ladle in or not until it went up to the butler’s lips.

But that’s exactly the point. The trick isn’t the point. It just happened. At some point in the background water became wine. No big deal.

And now the party has wine. Not just any wine, but really good wine. In fact, the wine is better than the first wine that the groom actually paid for and brought to the party. The master of the feast is incredulous. I can’t believe you saved the best for last. This is one classy groom.

But there’s more behind that statement as well. The master of the feast points out that most people serve the good wine first. This is typical of the Hellenistic worldview of this time period. They saw the world as starting off in glory and splendor but declining with time. Theirs was a view of deterioration and dilapidation. Things fall apart. That’s what they believed.

Saving the best for last is a different way of thinking. It’s a different way to look at your wine menu, but it’s also a different way to look at the world. The words of the master of the feast ring true with what Jesus was doing on a deeply theological level. In a sense, God has kept the good wine until now. But Jesus is here. His ministry has begun. He has come of age. And the good wine is available. Jesus is bringing in something better than what was.

Notice how understated Jesus is in all this. He just did this incredible thing. He just introduced his ministry. We see later that his disciples noticed and believed. But if I were Jesus, I would take advantage of this moment. I would stand up and say, “While you’re enjoying this delicious

wine, let me take this opportunity to let you know about a new theological movement that I’m beginning. If you’re interested, talk to one of my disciples or you can sign up at my web page, www.bestwine.com. The first 50 people to sign up even get a free wine glass!”

But Jesus does none of this. He simply makes the party better. Every aspect of this story just amazes me. Jesus is content to come to this party and simply make it a better party. He saves face for the groom, he gives in to his mother, he makes some really good wine. And that’s it.

Jesus makes the party better. He becomes the life of the party.

It makes me think about my life and about how Jesus brings me life. Jesus doesn’t bring these people a powerful religious experience. He doesn’t preach to them or teach them a new worship song. He gives them some good wine. He gives the party life.

I grew up in a family that attended church. I’m extremely grateful for that. But you pick up things along the way and there was a time in my life when I wasn’t sure I wanted the kind of life that Jesus brought. I thought Jesus only brought the kind of life you find in church. I remember thinking, “If I don’t like going to church, why would I like going to heaven?”

It’s a pretty good question to be asking. I think this story helps to answer it. Jesus doesn’t bring us church life. He brings us life; the kind of life that we know; the kind of life that we are familiar with, and the kind of life that we like.

Jesus came not to bring us religion, but to bring us life. This is the better thing. This is the best wine.

Now, I actually happen to like going to church now—most of the time. But I also like going home from church and watching football. I also like eating hamburgers with lots of pickles on them. I also like swimming in lakes and being in the snow and going on hikes and drinking coffee with friends and watching movies and making jokes and playing games. Jesus came to fill all of that with life—to be the life of the party. Not just the life of the church.

My wife has started being fond of country music. I thought I knew my wife when we got married, but apparently people change. However, I have to admit that there are some really interesting songs that country musicians come up with. One is called, “If I could have a beer with Jesus” by Thomas Rhett. The lyrics go like this:

*“If I could have a beer with Jesus
Heaven knows I’d sip it nice and slow
I’d try to pick a place that ain’t too crowded
Or gladly go wherever he wants to go.”*

It's a silly song, but it captures this idea. Jesus might not mind sitting down and having a beer. He might not mind grilling burgers and going to the beach. He sure didn't seem to mind bringing life to this party.

How does Jesus bring life to where you're at now?

Glory is manifested

The bulk of the story is done, but there is a bit of an epilogue.

John 2:11-12:

¹¹This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

¹²After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.

John points out that this was the first of Jesus' signs. And he says that this sign "manifested his glory." There it is again. Jesus bringing wine to a party manifests the glory, "glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." It's a complete breakdown of the sacred and the secular. The life of the party and the glory of God are one and the same.

Jesus used Jewish ceremonial jars to indicate that what he was kicking off was the next stage in the God's plan. It was step two. The apostle Paul called this the "new way of the Spirit" in contrast to the "old way of the written code" (Romans 7:6). This is what comes next.

And the wine was better because God's plan moves forward. What comes next is better than what comes before. The Christian's basic attitude is hope, not nostalgia.

Jesus revealed his glory through some really good wine. The result is that some of his disciples believed in him. They had already started following him, but now they started to have faith. The beginning of their faith came not from a religious experience or a great sermon or incredible worship music. Jesus manifested his glory by being the life of the party.

Conclusion

Our story for this morning and our story for next week go together. Each of them breaks the categories that we

might put Jesus in. This morning Jesus brings life to a party. Next week we'll see Jesus bring condemnation to the Temple.

What began as a coming of age story for Jesus becomes a coming of age story for us as well. As Jesus has gone from being a child to an adult, he has kicked off a movement that offers the chance for us to go from the old ways to something new. Jesus has taken the stone pots of religion and filled them with the wine of new life. He opens a door for us to go from the old way of the written code to the new way of the Spirit.

And what we find as Jesus comes of age is that adulthood isn't what we thought it would be. It's not about getting more serious, less fun, and laying on the responsibilities.

The new stage of life that Jesus brings is life. Real life. The kind of life we want, the kind of life that the people around us want. Jesus comes down to where we are and he makes the party better. He interacts with us. He's not distant and removed. Jesus lives the life we know.

And Jesus brings us the kind of life we want. Jesus is the life of the party. Make sure he's on your guest list.