

John 2:1-11

**Saving the Best for Last©
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In the Mitford series books, written by Jan Karon about Father Tim, an Episcopal priest who has served for many years in a small valley town in the North Carolina mountains, I read recently an example of saving the best for last.

Father Tim has been charged by the long-time mayor, Esther Cunningham to come up with something amazing, an attention grabber for the big festival where her rival who was running against her was planning great things. He was out to win, although he was somewhat underhanded about it all.

On the day of the big annual celebration, there was so much going on, and so many people in town you could hardly elbow your way through the crowd. Mack Stroup certainly had managed to get a large number of people over to his barbeque stand and was treating them with lots of good food and certainly political promises.

But then came the airplanes ... one by one they came in over the crowd, diving and rolling and putting on quite a show. Just as one would be finished and getting out of the way ... in came another to do something else that caught the breath of the crowds. Soon, there was no one left at the stand where Mack Stroup was ... they were all out in the open so they could see the air show.

And when that was over, and the crowds were beginning to part ways, in came more, causing puffs of smoke to spell out, one letter at a time, the slogan that Mayor Cunningham had run her campaign on year after year ... M ... I ... T... F ... all the letters were clearly seen, spelling "Mitford Takes Care of its Own." Wow! Everyone was just dazzled.

And then, if that wasn't enough of a thrill, here comes the best of all! The mayor's brother-in-law, Omer, who had managed to organize it all at Father Tim's request, said to the rector, "Got y'r high roller comin' in now! You've had y'r basic smoke writin' and stunt flyin,' now here comes y'r banner towin!"

And here it comes ... A red Piper Super Cub blasting over the treetops, trembling the heavens in its wake, and towing a banner that streamed across the open sky:

ESTHER ... RIGHT FOR MITFORD, RIGHT FOR MAYOR.

Like the grand finale on the 4th of July, they had saved the best for last and it was impressive. It made an impression and needless to say, people remembered how good Esther Cunningham had been ... and they voted for her again.

We hear today in John's story about this wedding in Cana, how Jesus helped the bridegroom and his family to save the best for last. To make an impression instead of losing face.

I love this story because it portrays Jesus in a casual, celebrative scene. Here he is not yet confronting the temple leaders, he is not yet facing all the sick, the poor, the lepers, the demons. Nor is he even close to the cross where he would die a cruel death.

He has only just begun. He has called some of his disciples and, with them along, he is attending a wedding in a small village called Cana in Galilee. There has been speculation and some writings about this event in some of the books that did not make it into the canon ... that is, the Bible, as we know it.

Some of those tell the story that John is actually the bridegroom, thus he is telling it as a very personal, up-close account. And they write that Mary is the sister of the bridegrooms Mother, Salome, which would be the reason that she would be so concerned about the family running out of wine.

A wedding in Palestine in Jesus' day was quite a celebration. The wedding usually took place on a Wednesday evening and then the couple would be taken through the streets of the village, going the longest way home, winding throughout the town with torches lit and all the people, holding torches themselves would be out greeting them.

And then people would follow them home ... a great parade ... where there would be celebration feasts for ... not just one evening. Not even for all the next day ... but it would go on and on for three days!

The people were peasants who worked hard and didn't have much, so for there to be such an occasion for celebration ... it was the highlight of the year.

But also, to be in the Middle East ... then ... and now ... means to show true radical hospitality. When we lived in Parsons, Kansas, there was a member in the church who was from Lebanon.

Nehme was the extreme example of pure radical hospitality. It didn't matter what time of day or night you went to see Nehme and Dana. Out came all the food ... toubouli, little pastries with beef and rice, and baklava and other sweets, and wine and arrat (a hot, licorice tasting liquor.)

For Nehme, it would be a terrible sign of disgrace and unwelcome if he didn't offer food and wine. Even when he lost his eyesight and became depressed, he still cooked and he still would feel his way out into the garden to give you a sack full of vegetables.

This is the way it was in that time and in that village when Jesus went to the wedding in Cana. Wine was so significant in so many ways. It was a sign of an abundance of blessings and joy and celebration, but it was also a necessary staple because the water wasn't very good.

To run out of wine was a disgrace for the host. It was a sign of very bad planning and not considering the guests, and it was extremely inhospitable. If the bridegroom and his family ran out of wine, it would have ruined the celebration and it would have ruined their reputation. They would have been the laughing stock of the village.

Really, when you think about all the weddings you've gone to, what is the part you remember the most? Does anyone really remember the sermon that the minister so carefully planned out for this occasion? I doubt it.

Do you remember the flowers, or the colors the bride so carefully selected? Maybe some do ... probably the women will for a while.

Do you remember the bride's dress and her face and the groom's look in his eye as he saw his beautiful bride coming down the aisle? I'm guessing that memory is the one that is a prominent one. It is about them, of course.

But don't you really remember the reception ... the food, the tables, the decorations, the wine and drinks, the dancing, the music ... all of those things representing a great celebration of a very special event? To run out of one of the main staples would be a disappointment to many.

And don't you love the conversation between Jesus and his mother? I find it humorous, in a way, although I've actually struggled with what it means, as I believe John puts it there for a reason.

Mary comes to her son and tells him about the pending catastrophe. "They are running out of wine!" she tells him.

Jesus' reply is one that is puzzling to us, but it probably wasn't so much then. He addresses her with what sounds disrespectful to us but was actually a term that was very respectful in his day.

"Woman," he calls her. "What is that to us?"

It seems he is asking why do we need to be concerned about that? And then he tells her, "My hour has not yet come."

I've wrestled with why Jesus would tell his mother that this isn't his business and that it isn't yet his hour. His hour for what? This is not my hour to do a miracle, to make wine out of water? To show who I am?

But what is a little humorous to me is how his Jewish mother seems to disregard his reply, his protest, and just calmly turns to the servants and tells them, "Do whatever he tells you." And then Jesus goes ahead and does it. This Son of God, this one who is the Savior of the world, the one called Emmanuel – God with us, is still kind of bossed around by his little Jewish mother.

William Barclay, who is a bible commentator, says that Jesus' was showing tender courtesy to his mother by addressing her as "Woman." And he interprets Jesus' answer as actually saying, "Let me handle this in my own way."

We will never really know all the details of this conversation but I think what is obvious is that, whether or not Jesus thought it was time to begin his ministry, Mary seemed confident that he was ready. She believed in this son of hers and believed that he could make a difference in this rather ordinary celebration that had the potential of turning sour and being robbed of grace and blessing.

And we are told that Jesus had the servants fill the 6 large jars that were lined up for the ritual of purification with water. They held, altogether, 180 gallons of water. And the steward, or the headwaiter, as we might call him, tasted the wine that he would have expected to be of a much lower quality, now that it is the third day of the celebration and people's taste buds are dulled.

But the steward is blown away with surprise! When he tastes this wine, he is amazed, and he goes to the bridegroom praising him for doing something that is unusual and unheard of. This host has saved the best for last!

Like the air show in Mitford, people were impressed, the host was saved from disgrace ... instead ... grace was poured out. 180 gallons of grace was poured out for the guests!

The truth is, God always saves the best for last for us. Think about it ... at creation God looked around at all the magnificent beauty that he had created ... and he said it was GOOD. But the best was still to come. And he created a man and a woman in his own image. And that was GOOD. But still, the best was yet to come.

And in his servants ... Abraham and Sara, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Moses, Samuel, Ruth and David ... and through all the prophets ... God spoke, and led his people. And STILL the best was yet to come!

And finally, he is born ... Emmanuel ... God with us. Jesus, the Son of the everlasting God in Flesh comes to dwell with the people. He comes to a wedding in Cana and he begins his ministry with a miracle ... a sign that sheds a little light on who he is ... a glimmer of blessing and grace and glory.

And still ... the best is yet to come! Because he will do much, much more than turn water into wine. He will heal the sick, cause the lame to walk, he will walk on water, he will give sight to the blind, he will preach justice and peace to the poor and the outcast and will defy those who abuse the very word of God for their own welfare.

And he will allow himself to be nailed to a cross to take on the sins of the world. That's amazing and that is breathtaking, but still ... the best was yet to come.

Even as three days were the time for celebration for a wedding, three days were significant for the Son of the Most High because on the third day the power of God raised him up from death to life and the tomb was broken open. And the sting of death was diminished.

And still ... the best is yet to come. Because we believe that we too shall be raised from death to life, and that this one who could change the water into wine has the power to create a new heaven and a new earth.

When you are at a celebration and the grand finale comes to an end, don't give in, for a minute, to the temptation to feel let down, to think that's the best it will ever get.

Remember that with God, the best is always yet to come. God is the ultimate, gracious host who shows perfect radical hospitality. I don't know if wine will be served in the Kingdom, but I believe wine, in this story, is a symbol of the abundant grace that is so generously poured out for us in Jesus Christ and in the gifts we have received from the Holy Spirit.

Just when you think you've come to the end of the road, or the end of a chapter, or the end of your life ... remember that God saves the best for last.

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