

THE MESSAGE

Aug 15, 2010

John 2:1-11

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Anxious?

Who here this morning has never been anxious? We all have at one time or another, haven't we? The start of a new job, retiring from a job, going off to college, getting married, staying married, raising kids, buying your first house, serving for the first time at church, preaching a sermon... I get anxious every time I get up to preach or speak to a crowd; no matter how prepared I am, no matter where I am.

We are anxious people. We live in anxious times. Anthony B. Robinson, a UCC minister (United Church of Christ) writes, "*Anxiety seems to be running higher than usual right now. It is also our human lot to be anxious. That's because we're finite creatures able to think beyond our finite circumstances... The challenge is not to let anxiety get the best of us, thus causing us to hurt ourselves and others.*" (see www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/your-life-better/living-in-anxious-times)

We are anxious people. It's part of our human nature. I appreciate what Pastor Robinson says, "*The challenge is not to let anxiety get the best of us, thus causing us to hurt ourselves and others.*" So often anxiety does get the best of us, doesn't it?

This past week we spent a few days on a family trip in Washington, DC. Every building we entered was an anxious time -- bags to be checked, metal detectors to walk through, body searches with a wand, cameras every where, police and security guards everywhere. Signs telling you which way you could and couldn't go. There was the anxiety of getting on and off the Metro at the right stop. Not to mention the anxiety of keeping our children safe every time we crossed a street.

The most anxious time was when we were walking past the White House. Simon, our seven-year-old, was walking along -- running his water bottle along the iron fence making a draaaaaa sound. You know how that goes. Well, the water bottle slipped out of his hand and landed inside the fence on the front lawn of the White House. We all stopped and looked at each other wide-eyed. Then we all turned and looked over at the guard house simultaneously with anxiety in the air. "What's he going to do?" I wondered. I tried to reach through the fence to grab the water bottle and be on our way as quickly as possible. But, I couldn't reach it.

The guard was watching me the whole time. We made eye contact. I pointed down at the water bottle inside the fence. He got up, walked out of the guard house, and started over to me. I called to Simon, who by this time was standing about 10 feet away safely beside his mother, out of the guard's sight. Simon came over and stood beside me. As the guard picked up the water bottle, I said the only thing I could in this situation -- "It's his..." (pointing to Simon). The guard smiled, handed Simon the water bottle through the fence and said, "There you go. Have a great day!"

Anxious? You bet!

Today we begin a five-week series on the Gospel of John. It's one of my favorite books in the Bible and I believe God has lots to say to us through it. I hope you will take time to read through John's Gospel this month. You can use the reading plan on the information sheet, or just read a chapter a day!

The author, John, is believed to be the John son of Zebedee, the younger brother of James. Both James and John were part of Jesus' 12 disciples and part of his inner circle with Peter. James and John were given the nickname "Sons of Thunder." Like thunder, James and John were loud, unpredictable, and at times obnoxious but by God's grace both men were transformed into people of humility and courage for Jesus' work on earth.

Of the four Gospels in the New Testament, John's stands alone in many ways. Matthew, Mark and Luke are often called the "synoptic" Gospels because they have so much material in common. John's Gospel is different. It contains stories that aren't found in the other Gospels, including our reading for today.

John's Gospel has a poetic feel to it, written with multiple layers of meaning. The deeper you go the more interesting it gets. This is not a Gospel to be devoured like fast food; it's a story to be savored, allowing the subtle flavors of its meaning to delight and challenge us.

The first twelve chapters of John's Gospel reveal many "signs." They are miracles, but John calls them "signs." Signs point to something else, that's the intent... For John these miracles reveal Jesus' power and point people to Jesus' true identity. That's the ultimate purpose of John's Gospel as he writes in chapter 20: *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."*

Our reading today is about the story of Jesus, his family, and the disciples at a wedding in Cana. Weddings were *the* most important social celebration of Jewish culture in the first century. Times were tough and most people's lives were filled with poverty and scarcity and anxiety. Wedding celebrations were times of abundance and feasting for days. A wedding celebration was a status symbol, which reflected both on the host and on the newly-married couple. So, the pressure to put on a great party was profound.

In that setting, we can understand the social crisis for the host to run out of wine. This would have been devastating with deep shame on the host as well as the newly-married couple, shame for the rest of their lives. On hearing that the wine gave out the reader would have gone, "Ohhhhhhhh Noooooooo!"

Into this anxious moment Jesus saves the day. He turns water into wine. Not just a little wine. Jesus miraculously produces between 120 and 180 gallons of wine. That's a lot of wine! And not just ordinary wine -- according to the chief steward, Jesus makes really fine wine. The best! Jesus brings out the best...

John tells us that there are two reasons for this sign:

First, Jesus reveals his identity as the Messiah and Son of God. Only the Messiah saves -- only the Son of God could pull off a miracle like that.

Second, Jesus' disciples begin to believe. They don't yet fully comprehend Jesus, but this first sign certainly opens their eyes to the reality that Jesus is far more than your average rabbi!

Jesus can do amazing, extraordinary things - that's the surface meaning of this story. And yet there is so much more to the story. So let's go deeper...

John intentionally tells us which containers Jesus uses to produce the wine. They are six stone jars which normally hold water for Jewish rites of purification. In other words, the Jewish guests at this wedding would have used the water from these stone jars to wash their hands ritually, making themselves clean before God. That's the law. The water would have been used to wash one's hands a particular way. Not necessarily for hygiene but because that's the way we do it.

Jesus instructs the servants to fill these stone jars with water and he transforms it into wine. It seems like an insignificant detail. but John is letting us know who Jesus is and why Jesus has come.

First, John is revealing that the old system of getting clean with God – the old system of obeying the Jewish law through rituals – is passing away. The old is being replaced with the new. No longer will people be made right through obedience to the law. Instead, they will be made right by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. Some scholars have suggested the six stone jars is symbolic: one short of the perfect seven, pointing out the inadequacy of trying to keep the law in order to be clean with God.

Second, John is revealing the abundance of God's grace and forgiveness flowing through Jesus, 120 – 180 gallons is a lot of wine! The large amount points out the reality of grace and forgiveness coming from Jesus for the sins of all peoples, for all times.

The steward's comment is theologically loaded with symbolism: *“Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.”* In other words, God's law is a good gift, but God has saved the best gift until now: Jesus. Jesus brings only the best and only Jesus can fulfill the Law.

“So what?” We might say. What does this 2000 year-old story mean for you and me today? We could answer that question in so many ways. Let me share just one with you.

Our theme this morning is about being anxious. We can all relate. We can relate to the anxiety of preparing for a dinner party, the anxiety of making sure that everything is ready, that everything is perfect. But the deeper issue in this story is the anxiety about being “clean” before God. “Can God, will God, really forgive what I’ve done?” That’s the question.

I know many people who trust in God’s grace, believe in God’s grace but feel they’ve done something so awful, so hideous, so terrible that God couldn’t possibly forgive them for it. I’m here to tell you -- God can! When I hear about people who think that God couldn’t possibly forgive them I’m reminded a murderer-turned-minister, known to us as the apostle Paul (Acts 9).

Paul had a license to kill. He was filled with bitterness and rage towards any one who followed “The way.” As Jesus’ disciples were known then. Paul hated Christians and everything they stood for. He was on a mission to stamp out Christianity in his lifetime. He decided to go to Damascus one day, home to many Jesus followers. He got permission from the high priest in Jerusalem – *from the high priest* – to capture and kill any Christian that he encountered along the way. “Permission granted.” Paul perhaps thought – “nothing can stop me now.”

On the way Paul encounters a bright light and is blinded. A voice from heaven says, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Paul’s name used to be Saul, before he met Jesus then it was changed because he was changed.) Paul says something like “Who’s there?” The voice says, “I’m Jesus the one you’ve been persecuting.” Jesus might have added “I’m alive and well, thank you very much and I am with you right now. And my friend I have a few things to say to you.”

Paul is told to go to the city of Damascus and wait for further instructions from a man named Ananias – most likely one of the people on Paul’s list to capture and kill. Ananias was a devoted and committed follower of Jesus and his ways.

At the same time Paul is going through his anxious ordeal, God appears to Ananias in a vision telling him about Paul, praying and waiting in a house across town, who just happened to have had a dream about Ananias coming and laying hands on him so that Paul can see again.

God may have been pretty cool about this but talk about high anxiety for Ananias. I can imagine him saying, “I don’t know if you’ve read the papers lately God, but this Paul is all over the news. He’s a terrorist. And the only reason he’s in town is to destroy the church I attend. If you think I’m going to seek him out then one of us is crazy.” And yet Ananias goes. God tells him to go to Paul and let him know that he is a “chosen instrument” to do Jesus’ work in the world.

Ananias goes. Paul receives from Ananias a prayer and laying on of hands and something like scales fall from Paul's eyes. He gets up, is baptized, eats some food, and is a different person – hence the new name. Both Paul and Ananias are obedient.

Anxious? You bet! New life and a new purpose absolutely...

Here was the meanest, nastiest, self-serving person alive killing anyone who got in his way. But then Paul encountered Jesus, was transformed, and through him God has changed the world for good.

Paul went on to write two-thirds of the New Testament, planted churches, left a lasting legacy – not of bitterness and rage – but of boldness and righteousness and faithfulness. Paul's story continues to lead lost people to Jesus, believers to be encouraged, churches to be strengthened, and entire communities to experience God's peace and new life.

If God can do that through a guy like Paul then God can certainly use you.

If God can forgive a guy like Paul then God can certainly forgive you. And change your life for good.

You too are a chosen instrument of God's grace and forgiveness. And nothing – God will allow nothing – to prevent you from receiving God's forgiveness and new life in Christ Jesus offered in this place.

Jesus is God's app (application) for sinners like you and me. Let him set you free and on your way today. We are people of the way – the way of anxiety – no. The way of obedience – yes. The way of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.