

Have you ever been to a wedding reception where the wine ran out? At my sister-in-law's wedding, the food ran out. The guests had enough to eat but the family and wedding party had to hold off from eating. That experience started the tradition that we use today called FHB – family hold back. For instance, at a thanksgiving meal, if not all the desserts showed up, my mother-in-law would say, *FHB on the pie*. At a coffee hour that Christi supplied the food for, we were running low on a treat she made; when I arrived, she looked at me and said, “FHB on the sandwiches.”

Jesus, his mother, Mary, and the disciples were invited to a wedding in Cana of Galilee. The Gospel writer John gave us details to show it was a big party. What makes it noteworthy (or Gospel worthy) is that during the reception, they ran out of wine. Mary said to Jesus, “The wine has run out.” Jesus said, “Woman, what is that to me; my time has not yet come?” She did not respond to Jesus. Instead, she turned to the servants and said, “Do whatever he tells you to do.” Jesus told them to fill up the six stone jars with water (and they did).

If I can pause the story for a moment, I want to look at the relationships here. Mary tells Jesus the wine has run out which sounds to me like she is saying, “Do that thing you do, the wine has run out.” Jesus says no because if he does-that-thing-he-does no one will look at him the same way (thus “his hour” has come). Mary ignores his reply and instead talks directly to the servants – *do whatever he says to do*. How many large receptions have you been to where you, or your mom, was able to talk so directly with authority to the servants. Mary has authority with Jesus (to do that thing he does) and with the servants. Jesus tells them to fill the six stone jars used for purification – the washing of hands and feet upon entering the party. One jar holds 25-30 gallons. At eight pounds per gallon, the jar full of water will be 200 to 240 lbs. At six jars, that’s at least 1,200 lbs. They don’t have a faucet or water hose; the water will have to come from a well or a nearby river. What Jesus asked them to do involves a lot of labor.

Let’s restart the story. Once the six jars are filled, he tells a servant to draw some water and give it to the head steward who declares this to the groom: Everyone serves the best wine first and once people are drunk will serve the inferior wine; but you have saved the best for last!

Nowhere in this story are we told that the water was turned into wine. It’s like the reading audience of John’s Gospel already knew the story; John was simply filling in the details. He didn’t give us the formula or the prayer Jesus used (or even that there was a prayer). Mary knew Jesus could do it – so much so that she didn’t even have to tell him what to do. In other Gospel accounts, Jesus was driven into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil after his baptism. One of the temptations from the devil was this: you look hungry, turn this stone into bread. We are not tempted by things we cannot do... which means perhaps that Jesus can turn stones into bread and perhaps has done it before. In this season of Epiphany, of new learning, we see that Jesus can take water and turn it into wine and stones into bread. Is there nothing then that God cannot do?!

There are three ways to look at this story and apply it to our lives. First, God can do anything. Or another way to put it, nothing is impossible with God. Second, obey your mother. Or another

way to put it, how good it is when children listen to the wisdom of their parents. Or grandchildren to their grandparents. (When I delivered this message at the 8 am service, one of the participants said, “Or when husbands listen to their wives.” Yes, how good it is when spouses listen to the wisdom of each other.) Commandment number five: honor your mother and your father. Jesus followed the commandment – even when he initially disagreed with his mother.

So, number one is God can do amazing things. Number two, how good it is when children listen to the wisdom of their parents. That brings us to number three. It’s my favorite because number three is what does this sign mean to you, right now? Number one and two are locked into Scripture and Church tradition; but three, well, that’s up to you.

Here is what this water-into-wine sign means to me.

I occasionally get asked if I think this sign happened or if it is allegorical. My “number three” is this: yes, I believe he literally and actually turned 1,200 gallons of water into wine. It had never happened before (in recorded history) and it has never happened since. It’s a one-time sign, if you will. I believe his sign, as with the rest of his signs, literally happened so that we can metaphorically see the signs in our lives. For instance, Jesus stopped a funeral procession for a young man who had died. He touched the coffin and the young man came back to life. I think it literally happened, once. And, metaphorically, it shows that God can bring things that were dead in our life back to life. I have seen God breathe life into relationships that were dead. I have seen God bring people who were on the verge of taking their own life and brought them to live a life of joy and peace. Because I have seen these things happen, through prayer and a lot of hard work (like filling six jars with 25 gallons of water), I believe that Jesus literally did that sign.

Going back to point number two – listening to wisdom from those who love you – I would not be an ordained Episcopal priest if not for the wisdom of my wife. She is the one who raised ordination to me and said, *your time has come, it is time to do that thing you do*. Just like Mary knew it was time for Jesus (even when he said it wasn’t yet his hour), Christi knew it was my time. On my desk I have a handwritten note from a man in New York. In the note, he thanked me for the way I helped his grandfather and cared for him as a pastor. God takes something ordinary, like me, and is making extra ordinary things happen. I believe that number one, God can do amazing things. I know what a good thing it is to listen to the wisdom of those who love us. And, I believe that Jesus did signs literally so that we can metaphorically see him working in our lives and that we, being ordinary and doing ordinary things, like filling jars with water, can make tremendous impacts in others and bring them peace and joy.

One more thing, the chief steward said Jesus saved the best for last. I also believe that God has saved what the prophet Isaiah saw as the best party, the best wine, the best celebration ever for us to experience when we pass from this earth and join with those we love. I believe this because God does amazing things, he loves me and I listen to his wisdom (as best I can) and that I have seen him do wonderful work of bringing peace and joy in my life; so of course, God would do what God does and save the best for last.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.