

They Have No Wine

John 2:1-11

When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." (John 2:3-5)

"They have no wine." I doubt it's the line I'm supposed to fixate on, but I can't help it. I wonder how Mary says it. Does she pull her distracted son away from his friends before she whispers it in his ear? Is there an edge to her voice? Is her tone urgent, echoing the growing panic of the servants? I imagine she takes Jesus into an inner room, fixes his attention with a stern stare, and braces herself for pushback. *They have no wine.*

The wedding in Cana story is not—finally—a story about scarcity. It's a story about plenitude. About God's extravagant and limitless generosity.

Needless to say, there is much theological richness to mine in the story. The eschatological significance of a wedding as the backdrop for Jesus (our bridegroom's) first miracle. The importance of celebration, pleasure, and hospitality that Jesus affirms in conjuring 150 gallons of first-rate wine, just to keep a party going. God's desire and capacity to transform the ordinary into the sacred, the weak into the strong, the incomplete into the whole. The foreshadowing of the communion table in the sharing of wine.

But what strikes me is the pivotal role Mary plays in the story. Her line, "They have no wine," is a line I can get behind, because it's more than a statement of fact. It's an articulation of need. Of desperation. Of hope. Essentially, it's a prayer of intercession for a world that is not okay.

"They have no money." "She has no health insurance." "He has no friends." "I have no strength." Mary's line is a line I repeat daily, in endless iterations, for myself and for others. It's the line I cling to when I feel helpless, when I have nothing concrete to offer, when God seems to be a million miles away. It's a line that insists on the mysterious power of telling God the truth.

Mary's role in Jesus's first miracle is an odd and provocative one, but I'm grateful for it, because it allows me a place in what otherwise feels like an inaccessible narrative. I have no idea how to turn gallons of water into gallons of wine. But I do know how to say what Jesus's mother says. Sometimes, it's the *only* thing I know how to say. "There is need here." "Everything is not okay." "We're in trouble." "They have no wine."

So what does Mary do that we might learn from? How does she participate in Jesus's miracle of abundance?

Mary notices. In first-century Palestine, wedding feasts lasted for days, and it was the host's responsibility to provide abundant food and drink for the duration of the festivities. To run out of wine is a dishonor and a disgrace—a breach of hospitality the guests will remember for years.

I can easily imagine how the servants at Cana go limp with fear when the wine disappears; this is the kind of miscalculation that might cost them their jobs. We have no idea what Mary's connection is to the bride and groom; all we know is that she is one wedding guest among many. But she is the one who notices need. She sees what's amiss. She perceives the high likelihood of scandal and humiliation brewing beneath a seemingly glossy surface. If John's account is trustworthy, Mary notices and registers concern before Jesus does.

Mary tells the right person. John's Gospel doesn't include Jesus's infancy narratives. No angelic annunciations, no babe in the manger, no prophetic words or portentous stars. But the Mary this Gospel describes still knows her son. She knows what he's capable of and she trusts that he alone can meet the need she perceives. I love the assurance with which she brings her distress to Jesus. Given her thirty-year history with him, given the relationship they've cultivated, she is as certain of his ability and generosity as she is of the need itself.

Mary persists. This, for me, is the oddest and yet most encouraging part of the story. I don't know what to make of Jesus's reluctance to help when Mary first approaches him. "What concern is that to you and me?" he asks dismissively when he hears about the dwindling wine supply. "My hour has not yet come." Of course, Jesus is no fool; he knows that his countdown to crucifixion will begin as soon as he makes his identity known. Maybe he's reluctant to start that ominous clock ticking. Maybe he thinks wine-making shouldn't be his first miracle. Maybe there's a mysterious timeline he wants to follow—a timeline known only to him and to God.

Whatever the case, Mary doesn't cave in the face of his reluctance; she continues to press the urgency of her need into Jesus's presence. As if to say, "I don't care about your timeline! There's a desperate problem, right here, right now. Change your plans. Hasten the hour. Help!"

Mary instills trust and invites obedience. "Do whatever he tells you," she advises the household servants. She doesn't wait to hear the specifics of Jesus's plan. She doesn't pretend to know the details. She doesn't invent a roadmap. She simply communicates her longstanding trust in Jesus and invites the servants to practice the minute-by-minute obedience that makes faith possible.

The servants' task isn't easy. There's no running water in the ancient world, and those stone jars are huge. How many trips to the well, how much arm strength, how deep a resolve would such a task require? I imagine it's Mary's faith that helps the servants persevere when they feel bewildered and ridiculous. She acts as a catalyst, turning potential into action. She lays the groundwork for Jesus's instructions: "Fill the jars." "Draw some out." "Take it to the chief steward." She fosters a faith-filled atmosphere that becomes contagious. Instilling wonder in those around her, she ushers in her son's miracle.

Maybe I'm drawn to Mary because it's a hard business, holding the promise of God's abundance up against the agony of this world's scarcity, pain, and need. I love the miracle itself and all that it signifies. But I'm more acquainted with water than I am with wine. Many of us are, if we're honest. It doesn't matter what the particulars look like—chronic illness, physical pain, financial trouble, systemic injustice. Regardless of how we rewrite Mary's line to match our circumstances, it rings true for all of us, in some guise or another. *They have no wine.*

So what do we do? How do we participate in miracles of plenty? Maybe we can be like Mary. Maybe we can notice, name, persist, and trust. No matter how profound the scarcity, no matter how impossible the situation, we can elbow our way in, pull Jesus aside, ask earnestly for help, and ready ourselves for action. We can tell God hard truths, even when we're supposed to be celebrating. We can keep human need squarely before our eyes, even and especially when denial, apathy, or distraction are easier options. We can invite others to obey the miraculous wine-maker we have come to know and trust.

"They have no wine." "Do whatever he tells you." We live in the tension between these two lines. Let's live there well, sure of the one whose help we seek and confident that our asking matters.