

Good News for the Stressed

[John 2:1-12](#)

Good News for the Distressed

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, March 5, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray. Now Lord Jesus Christ, may your Word enacted through this sacrament make manifest the fullness of who you are as Messiah, the Son of the living God, so that we will act faithfully and do the work that you have given us to do in this world. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I expect that many of us come into this sanctuary today in lives that are full of stress. We offer John Wagner to you as some humor in order to relieve that stress. John, I think you're about ready to undergo a career in stand-up comedy, if you've not already done that.

There is good news for all of us who have experienced stress. This past week has been stressful on our family. My wife's mother died early Friday morning. We have lost several people, in fact, this week, connected to members of the church. Probably most dramatically the death of the man killed at the corner of Rts. 270 and 495; he was the husband of our school librarian. Sarah Ely and her family are in deep stress and grief today.

When life is out of control, when it is falling apart, when it has become fragmented and there is too much to do, things go wrong. We can't keep it together; even we Presbyterians in our orderliness become disorderly and indecent. We come to the presence of God with a blatant request: that in the midst of our stress and loss, that God would hear us and restore order and bring miracles.

We know that weddings, this time of year, are stressful events. There's the time consumption of preparing for the wedding, the sheer amount of money – currently twenty-five to fifty thousand dollars for the average wedding – the complexity of the period of preparation, the worry about what could go wrong and may not go wrong, the family tensions, the couple's tension, the concern about unruly guests, who's invited, where it should be, and who's going to go to the party versus the ceremony itself. All these can be stressful things.

I presided at the wedding of a couple; he was a member of a nationally ranked rugby team and she was one of the cheerleaders. As you looked on the guys' side – I called them the hunks – and you looked at the ladies' side – I called them the honeys. The rugby team and the cheerleaders, magnificent to look at, but in the stress of it all, needed to have a little extra imbibing in order to get ready for the wedding. This is not a really good behavior pattern for Presbyterian preparation of weddings. There was quite a bit of tension in the ceremony; we had to spend some time working it through and trying to get them sober. In the midst of all that, the wedding came off and the couple's reflection back on the wedding was simply this: "We didn't know that we would experience the presence of God at the wedding." Later they made a commitment to follow Jesus and joined the church. The wedding was not the miracle; it was the presence of Jesus, who showed up at the wedding, that was the miracle.

Stress is a reality of life in Washington, D.C. There is a lot of pressure to perform, the feeling the weight of a situation where you are on the spot to make it work. There is importance and urgency, there is expectation, and there will be frustration if things do not go well. There can be anger if things do not work out the way people expect them to go. Tension, some push and pull pressing on the agenda. Trouble, misfortune, misery, hardship, and affliction can be the result when we feel the pressure. Pressure is one body pressing on another body, and often we feel the pressure of other people's expectation weighing on us.

I felt that pressure when I was younger and was responsible to prepare and sing with a symphony orchestra a piece by Franz Schubert, a German leader. I was feeling very nervous and began to sing, and

the first few phrases went wonderfully well, but then I forgot the words. The stress had taken over, and I began to create German words I did not know. At the end of the concert, my German coach, who was considered one of the nationally ranked German music scholars of his time, stumbled up to me and said, “You know, you sang beautifully, but it was a version I’d never heard before. You sang some German words that I’d never – I’m not familiar with.”

I believe Jesus felt a certain pressure and stress from his mother at this point. I think John’s sense of humor makes it clear that Jesus is not the primary person at the wedding. The first person who’s mentioned is Jesus’ mother. She’s invited to the wedding; oh, by the way, Jesus and the disciples were also invited. I think that’s John’s way of saying that there is a primary view that’s going on at this moment, and mom is more important than son. One of the other points made in this text is that the son makes it clear to mom that even though she has expectations he will perform, he’s not having anything of it. He has a different agenda.

However, John’s overall theme, that the wedding is about God’s opportunity to demonstrate love, is the pre-eminent pattern that wins. God’s love always moves to relieve human stresses and tension. And so Jesus hears the voice of his Father through the words of his mother, and then addresses the need of the wedding, which is, they’ve run out of wine.

Mom sees the stress, but Jesus sees the kingdom of God. This is one of the tensions we have in our own lives. We feel the immediate stress, and we see the trouble, but we miss the kingdom opportunity that’s right behind it. One of the points of this very first sign or miracle of Jesus is that the miracle is not the point. The miracle and the sign give access to the reality of who Jesus is in the kingdom of God that is way beyond the stressful solution of bringing more wine to the scene. Jesus puts his mom in place, not so much to denigrate her desire, but to show her and the others that there is a greater reality he must report to, and there is a greater authority he must hear.

Jesus is not just into the miracle. Jesus’ desire is to reveal the kingdom and the sign beyond the miracle. Jesus turns common stresses of our ordinary life into extraordinary blessings. Every stress that we have is an opportunity for Jesus to be in our lives in a unique and particular and helpful way. We live in common places, like Cana; we have common parties like weddings; we have common people, who are poor and without enough to make it happen; common families that struggle with identity and power, like mom and son; common stresses because we run out of food and don’t have enough to drink. We have common things that are common opportunities for God to show up in spectacular ways. We are about ready to celebrate, in just a few minutes, the common meal. If we believe that the table with the cups and the containers with the baked bread is all there is, as good as the bread will be – because the young people have fixed it – that’s not enough. The table shows us a greater glory beyond which we have no meaning unless we see it.

Back in 1972, I was a youth ministry pastor in a Baptist church responsible. It was decided that the young people of the church would put on a huge meal, a prime rib dinner, and thank the congregation for all the good things they had done for the youth ministry. It was a wonderful plan; however, we got halfway through the meal and serving the prime rib and the green beans and the baked potatoes and discovered that soon we’d be running out of prime rib. As we got to the end of the meal, the portions of prime rib became smaller and smaller and smaller, to the point that there were just mere fragments of meat on the last dinner plates. Needless to say, there were a number of frustrated and upset members of the church who didn’t get their prime rib, and the pressure was on me because I’d supposedly planned the event. Do not call on me again to plan dinners for the church. But what happened after that was an amazing thing. After the feelings had settled down, people began to experience and reflect on the real glory of that moment: that this was one of the few times in their entire lives when young people had served them a meal, and they saw the glory of God in that service.

It is in the servants, among the servants, that Jesus’ full glory shows up here. That glory is hidden from the majority of people who drink the wine. Some of them are so out of it they wouldn’t have known the difference anyway. But the servants and the disciples know that what happens here behind the scenes is that Jesus takes ordinary water and turns it into wine, and not just ordinary wine, but really excellent, gourmet wine. The miracle is a sign of the kingdom and it points to a greater reality. The miracle,

however, is restrained; it doesn't jump out and hit everybody in the face. Like most miracles that happen, they're for a few people that pay attention. The sign is for the whisper of greatness, the rumor of something that's bigger; the muted abundance and the hidden glory – it is a quiet parable of secret extravagance.

It is when God shows up for a few people, to relieve their stress, and the majority of people do not know what's happened. This is what happens when we get into places where we pray for God's intervention. There may be something dramatic happening that will shine up for you and for me, but for the greater world, it will never be visible. And the point is not the miracle; the point is, it's a glimpse of God showing us there's a greater reality that can happen to touch our lives in the midst of our stress. We want the miracle, but Jesus wants to show us the kingdom. We need the wine, but Jesus wants to show us the glory of who he is. After all, why would God waste such wonderful wine on a group of peasants who really can't afford the good stuff to begin with? And in fact, it is this pattern of hidden symbol that continually calls attention to the power of Jesus for a few people who pay attention, while the greater crowd doesn't get it. For what happens when the greater crowd begins to see that Jesus can do miracles? Jesus calls attention to that problem a little bit later in John, when he says, "You crowd of people only follow me because I feed you and give you something to drink. You don't follow me because of who I am in the kingdom of God."

Johann Sebastian Bach specialized in creating secrets and hidden signs in his music. The wonderful work that is being played this morning by Bill Neil at the beginning of the worship service and at the end of the worship service, the Prelude and Fugue in E Flat Major, is one of those wonderful secret symbols of Bach's view of God. The fugue symbolized the trinity; it is in E flat and has three flats. Bach always enjoyed hints of the trinity. The fugue is in three sections, three different fugues with three different themes that come together at the end – Bach's way of saying that God is present, three persons in one. Most of us would probably not get the fullness of that sign, but for the few who have ears to hear and eyes to see, the kingdom is present in Bach's music.

And so it is in the real presence of Jesus here at the table. For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, they know that it isn't about the wine and the bread, it is about the presence, the real presence, of Jesus. That Jesus is here, and for those who can see Jesus, Jesus is here to bring the kingdom of God into focus. Wherever two or three are gathered, here it is for the banquet, Jesus is present, for a joyful event and a meal, to see the glory of God, not just the bread and the juice. It is important that when we are stressed we know that God wants to show up, not just to do the miracle, not to relieve us of the problem and the pain, but to prove to us once again that God is present and bringing the kingdom to bear on our immediate hurt and pain. Some people say, well, why doesn't God heal everybody? Because the kingdom of God doesn't show glory for everybody to be healed. Why doesn't God turn water into wine for all the weddings? Because the glory of God doesn't show in all weddings when water is turned into wine. Why doesn't God make the pain of life go away, why do we have to live in this stress and anxiety? Because the glory of God knows that when we live in that with faith, it shines forth the glory of God.

There's a true value of extravagance here that's hidden in the message. Jesus doesn't just turn one or two cups of water into wine. He turns six full purification water jars into wine, a hundred and twenty to a hundred and eighty gallons of wine, the best that money can buy. Why so much? Why such extravagance? It's because Jesus wants to make really clear to the few who pay attention that the kingdom of God is much more extravagant and powerful and glorious than we can possibly ask or imagine. Jesus is here, not because we necessarily sing the hymns or pray the prayers or experience the stained-glass windows or have a wonderful sermon, but Jesus is here beyond all of those signs to show us the kingdom of God. In all of our stress, the question that we must answer today is: Do we see, and do we believe? Do we know that it's not about miracles, it's about Jesus' presence with us in the stress? Do you believe that? According to your ability to respond to that is your ability to live with the pain and stress in life, even if the miracles are delayed.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, may you meet us in the ordinary things, even in the midst of our struggles. When we are distressed with things not turning out the way we wanted them to turn out, may we see those moments as opportunities for you to break through with your glory, And may we have the patience to allow you to do what you wanted to do without trying to force you to do something that we want you to do.

May you now speak to us and show us your presence. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.