

More Is Always Possible

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John 2:1-11

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Maybe I am stating the obvious, after all I am entering my rookie season of Carnival in the coming weeks, but while faith is serious business, there is also a sense of frivolity that is central to faith. Again, maybe I'm preaching to the choir here. That is not to say we should be content with cheap grace and a lack of commitment that can trivialize the life of faith, but the answer is not to double down on seriousness. We Calvinist Presbyterians have often been willing to represent that overcorrection and caricature...taking ourselves and the enterprise of faith with such an earnest seriousness that we suck the life out of it and become suspect of any sense of frivolity.

Speaking of frivolity, that reminds me of the Book of Leviticus. Actually, we barely read the Book of Leviticus because it is the exact opposite of frivolity...full of legalistic codes about how to perform sacrifices, how to prepare and eat foods, how to treat neighbors, strangers, and aliens, and lots of detailed sexual codes. The very first chapter of Leviticus deals with burnt offerings, which kind of like abortion or the death penalty today or the vaccine mandates today, burnt offerings were somewhat of a controversial issue in Israel's life—do some degree they were politically charged. Listen to the word of the Lord as it came to the prophet Isaiah and you can tell which side of the fence he was on...

¹¹ 'What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?

says the Lord;

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams

and the fat of fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls,

or of lambs, or of goats.

¹² When you come to appear before me,^[a]

who asked this from your hand?

Trample my courts no more;

¹³ bringing offerings is futile;

incense is an abomination to me.

New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—

I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.

¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals

my soul hates;

they have become a burden to me,

I am weary of bearing them.

¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands,

I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood.
cease to do evil,
¹⁷ learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.' (Isaiah 1:11-17)

For the prophet Isaiah, the burnt offerings that were pleasing to God were those that worked for justice and cared for the vulnerable in society.

The prophet Hosea also speaks clearly on this issue. Listen: 'For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.' (Hosea 6:6)

While burnt offerings do seem frivolous, antiquated, and certainly not some kind of condition placed on God, commentator Richard Boyce also reminds us that the burnt offering of livestock was an extravagant gift, not provoked by any wrongdoing or attempt to make amends on the part of the offering maker; it is a true 'love offering' free of constraint or requirement, 'like all true praise.'¹ Boyce gives us this illustration: 'an elder walks into the pastor's study and announces, 'Preacher, I want you to come out to the church parking lot with me. This morning I'm overwhelmed by God's goodness, and I'm under compulsion to do something extravagant. See this stack of \$100s? Let's go outside and burn'em! What would you do?' Boyce cautions, 'if you simply say 'no, no. Let's take that money and give it to Church World Service,' you may unintentionally demonstrate that you are more enamored with the power of money than the power of worship! A prize cow was as close to a stack of bills as the Israelites got. It could fill stomachs and provide security for many people,' but if it became a burnt offering, 'then all its life-giving potential went up in smoke.'²

But Jesus does not perform any sacrifices here in John; in fact one of the clear messages of the New Testament is that such costly sacrifices and acts of praise are no longer necessary as Jesus becomes both priest and sacrifice for the sake of the world. So why turn water into wine? It doesn't really help anybody and it is not that heroic like outrunning a train or raising someone from the dead like he does later in John's gospel. On the surface, this act seems more like a trick from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry than something associated with our Lord and Savior. No one is healed. No demons are exorcised. No one is cured of a disease. No one who is left broken on the side

¹ Richard Boyce, *Leviticus-Numbers Commentary, Westminster Bible Companion*, 15.

² Richard Boyce, *Leviticus-Numbers Commentary, Westminster Bible Companion*, 17.

of the road is put back together. No one is raised from the dead. No masses of hungry people are fed. Jesus attends a wedding in Cana of Galilee, the wine gives out, and without much fanfare or commotion, Jesus ensures that it is replenished. And that is the very first miracle John presents in his gospel account. Just a few chapters before, John starts his gospel account with the grand vision of the universe telling us 'in the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the Word created all things and has become a person for us in Jesus Christ who John declares is the Son of God, the human face of God, the very life of God in human form, and in order to show us how Jesus has come to transform the world and all of us, John leads with this miracle at Cana. Jesus turning water into wine. It just seems frivolous to me.

To use the language of social science, what and where is the collective impact? To use the language of pious religiosity, what souls are saved by this frivolous act? To use the language of one of Jesus' own disciples in reaction to another act of frivolity, 'why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' (John 12:5). Isn't this a bit of an extravagant waste? Even Jesus' contemporaries accused him of frivolity, gluttony, and worse... 'the Son of Man came eating and drinking,' we learn in Matthew's gospel, and they say 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' In a word, frivolous.

So why does Jesus commit this frivolous act? Just for fun? To show off his divine powers? To impress all the wedding guests? In his commentary on this passage, Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that the huge stone jars that contained the water that Jesus transformed were not just there for regular use, but were set aside for the rites of purification required by the law, to keep the people consecrated for God in the midst of a world defiled by uncleanness, sin, and impurity. Newbigin observes that water could 'remove the uncleanness,' but did not have the power to give the fullness of joy, and that what Jesus does in this act and in the larger canvas of his life and ministry is not simply to rectify a defect, but to offer the fullness of life, joy, and superabundance that is the new wine of God's inbreaking kingdom.³ Far from being a frivolous and trivial act, this act is at the heart of God's transformation of this world and reveals the transformative richness of grace at work, not only righting wrongs, but filling the lives of ordinary unsuspecting human beings with the richness and fullness of God, helping them to flourish and rejoice in God's goodness. Theologian Karl Barth reminds us that in spite of the high stakes, the life of faith and discipleship in service to Jesus Christ, has a certain 'freedom from purpose' that takes on the 'nature of a game or song [more than it does] work or warfare. For this reason,' he adds, the life of faith 'will always cause head-shaking among serious people who do not know the particular seriousness' of the Christian life. A person of faith, a follower of Jesus Christ, a person who rejoices in the miracle of the wedding at

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982.

Cana, therefore is someone 'who is not ashamed to do something quite useless in a world of serious purposes.'⁴

And perhaps this passage has some uncomfortable and dare I say 'frivolous' one more time lessons to teach us too. That God does not come into the world, first and foremost, to fix something that is broken, but to infuse us and all creation with his grace. That the point of faith is not so much to fix our problems but to taste God's goodness in and through them. One of the most frivolous, extravagant, maybe even unnecessary things we do as a Christian community is worship. We have no metrics to validate the amount of planning, musical gifts, resources that go into this one hour of the week. The time, energy, resources, investments, and commitment that we bring to worship may not always yield the commensurate results or the tangible benefits. And yet we come with our own burnt offerings and are tangled up with each other's lives, not to fix each other or to solve each other's problems or to compete with each other in a faith-based race to the top or to get immediate results, but to enrich one another with the goodness of life and to rejoice in a God who believes more is always possible with each of us and that he has come to enrich us, make us flourish, and to exalt us with a wine that will never fail.

Jesus' first miracle does not fix anybody; he does not right a wrong; or even preach a great sermon. Instead, he does something unnecessarily extravagant for a bunch of people who don't seem to be asking for it; he enables them to rejoice and flourish more fully than they thought possible. This is not the last miracle Jesus will enact that looks frivolous but fills the world with grace. It's what he does. Even on the cross, he offers himself to us all extravagantly and gathers sinners together to become something more than a collection of their worst impulses. Jesus' first miracle: extravagant, frivolous, maybe even unnecessary, and yet, the first sign that through his life we will never be without the overflowing abundance of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Karl Barth, '§53. Freedom before God,' in *Church Dogmatics* III/4, 78.