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John 2: 1-11: “Wedding, Family, and Community”

INTRODUCTION

Wedding ceremonies in the Chinese Indonesian communities are fun, interesting, AND LONG. After the religious ceremony, be it at a church for Christians, or at a temple for the Buddhists or Confucians, and before the reception, the bride and groom will go to one of the parents’ houses and do the tea ceremony. It is a ceremony where the newlywed serves tea, one cup at a time, to the elder family members from both sides. They will start with the oldest, great-grandparents or grandparents, then to the parents (usually the groom’s parents first, then that of the bride), then to aunts and uncles, down to older brothers and sisters and their spouses. Imagine if both bride and groom still have all grandparents, parents, and each has four siblings, plus aunts and uncles. This ceremony could last for hours. Once the couple serve tea to an elder family member, the person being honored will give their gift to the new couple. It may come in two forms: cash or gold jewelries—twenty-four carat solid-gold jewelries. The purpose behind this tradition is threefold. One, it is the opportunity for the elder relatives to give blessings to the new couple. Two, it is for the bride and groom to show respect and gratitude to the elders for loving them and raising them. And three, for the two sets of the family to meet together. All three of them are important, but it is the third that is striking among most Oriental cultures. A wedding, or a marriage to be exact, is not just about the husband and wife. It is the joining of two families. From this point on, the new son-in-law will call his wife’s parents Mom and Dad, and certainly, the new daughter-in-law will call her husband’s parents Mom and Dad also. There is no calling of their in-laws by their first names.

THE WEDDING IN CANA

Jesus was invited to a wedding, and so were his mother and his newly gathered disciples. From John’s account we know that it is at that wedding that Jesus performed his first miracle—or sign. Of all the miracles that Jesus can and will perform, why this? Why at a wedding? Why not raising someone from the dead, or feeding thousands of people, or casting demons and throwing them inside thousands of pigs? They are more spectacular and eye-catching than turning water into wine at a smallish wedding in some small city near his hometown. The wedding could have been that of a poor couple. They ran out of wine in the middle of the reception. This miracle seems so small that even the head steward of the wedding did not know where the good wine came from.

The way John recorded the miracle may give us a clue of why this miracle is so significant. He started by saying, “And on the third day...” In the Greek text, the word “and” or *kai* is worth our attention, because it connects this episode to the previous one. In John 1 we read, after the Evangelist’s long theological explanation of the Word made flesh, he described the ministry of John the Baptist and his calling of Jesus as the Lamb of God. In chapter 1:29 John wrote: “The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” In John 1: 35-37, again John wrote: The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they

followed Jesus.” Then, in chapter 1: 43 we read: “The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” So, take note to the rapid succession of time that John wrote one after another: “the next day, the next day, the next day.”

And now, it is the third day. This rapid succession of time may give us an indication, besides John the Evangelist’s keenness in remembering the events as it happened (he was an eyewitness to many of these events—the one who calls himself “the disciple whom Jesus loves”), the urgency of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus only has a little over three years to do his ministry. So, time is very critical here. Just three days prior, Jesus was forming his close-knit community. He chose his first disciples. He is about to do his mission.

In chapter 1, when Philip told Nathaniel that he has “found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth,” the latter was rather skeptical. He replied: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” When finally, Nathanael agreed to follow him, Jesus told him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Jesus was promising Nathanael—and the other disciples too—something spectacular, something big about him. And this turning of water into wine is the first one of all this. The miracle at this wedding stands as a demonstration, not only that Jesus is divine, but also that he does his divine work from within a community. First, he gathered his disciples. Then, at the wedding, at the joining of the couple and their families, Jesus leads us to think about the community of God’s people, blessed by Jesus through his divine power.

The wedding was supposed to be a joyful occasion, but the couple—or the groom in this case—was about to be put to shame. Running out of wine is a shame. Serving lower quality of wine after the guests are drunk is ok but running out of it completely is unacceptable. Jesus’ mother saw this and took action; or rather she wanted Jesus to take action. Could it be that Mary was demonstrating her understanding that her son is both divine and human? But Jesus’ reply may have surprised us. In our English Bible reading today, taken from *Today NIV*, we read, “Woman, why do you involve me?” The Greek text says it more plainly, *Τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί, γύναι*; or “What to me and you, woman?” What is this to Jesus and his mother? What’s the relationship of the running out of the wine and Jesus and his mother? Then Jesus adds: “my HOUR has not come.” In his response to Mary, Jesus points out to something important. It is about his hour.

And what is it about the hour of Jesus? It appears to us that on the one hand Jesus did not want Mary to rush him, but on the other hand he also is signaling that something extraordinary will happen soon. A miracle is bound to happen. In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ use of the word “hour” or *hora in Greek*, has to do with his glorification, and the glory of the Trinity. In John 17, in the prayer that he brought to His Father just before he was arrested and be crucified, Jesus said: “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you,”

And at the conclusion of this miracle story, John wrote, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” The hour of Jesus is directly connected to the purpose of his incarnation: the completion of God’s redemptive plan for humanity, so that Jesus will be glorified, and consequently, the Trinity is also glorified.

In the very first miracle of Jesus, the glorification happened at a wedding. Why wedding? Could it be that it is because at a wedding, two human beings are joined as one? Two individuals who came from two different families, backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and any other markers of differences, are now joined as one. Therefore, could we say that Jesus chose to perform his first miracle at a wedding because the occasion itself signals something that is theologically important: a covenant? Just as at a wedding the two persons are joined as one in a marital relationship, in God's covenant with us we are forever bound to God the Trinity. And this bond of the covenant is everlasting.

Many people cry at weddings. I cry at baptisms. And to me the two have some similarities. Just like a wedding shows the joining of the couple, a baptism signifies the union between God and us. It is not just between God and that baby or person being baptized. It is a sign of the covenant between God and us, his people. As we are united with God in baptism, the union is permanent. There is nothing that can separate us from God. God is with us forever. The meaning of Immanuel, God with us, is demonstrated clearly in baptism. Every time I witness a baptism, there is something inside my heart that stirs me, namely the realization of how big God's love toward us is.

Today is the second Sunday after Epiphany. The Old Testament reading from the lectionary is Isaiah 62: 1-5. At a first look I was a bit puzzled in my attempt to see the link between the Old Testament and Gospel readings. But then it dawned on me. The passage in Isaiah shows us the unchanging, permanent love of God toward us in covenant. We already read it in the liturgy, but let's hear verses four and five again:

62:4 You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. 62:5 For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

For the people in Exile, this passage brought comfort and assurance that God is with them, even though life in Exile was unbearably difficult. Compare the message of hope in Isaiah with the sorrowful song of Lamentations 1:

“How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations.”

In Exile the people are called widows, women without help, or protection, or dignity. But the message of hope in Isaiah 62 calls the people as married. They are married to God. They are no longer forsaken. Last Sunday Rog reminded us that God told the people in Exile: “Fear not, for I am with you.”

This miracle, done at the wedding shows us that as Jesus gathered his first disciples that represent the community of his followers near and far, the miracle at the wedding signifies for us the union between God and his people in a covenantal relationship. The community of Jesus' disciples was the early gathering of the church, the body of Jesus. Jesus' prayer in John 17, that

the hour has come for the Father to glorify him reminds us that the disciples too, are united with him, and therefore with the Trinity. The prayer of Jesus in John 17 also includes a prayer for the community of God's people. In John 17: 20-21 Jesus prays not just for the twelve, but also "on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us." Jesus prays for the church, the community, so that they may be one just as much as the Trinity is one. This prayer brings together our understanding of Jesus' redemptive work and our union with the Trinity.

The first miracle of Jesus at a wedding in Cana stands as a constant reminder to us, that just as much as we are united in a covenantal relationship with God the Trinity through Jesus' Redemptive work, we are never left alone by God. This union is not just "in sickness and in health, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part," but into all eternity. In the world of Covid and conflicts, cancer and confound, consternation and chaos, we are never separated from God who loves us. Also, we have each other as the church, the community, the people whom Jesus gathers to be one. Therefore, together with the Psalmist we can say to God, "How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings." (Ps 36:7).

AMEN