

Kirby Lawrence Hill
January 16, 2022
Psalm 36:5-10
John 2:1-11

Abington Presbyterian Church

TRANSFORMING OUR EFFORTS

Your pastor invited me to share a bit of my story today. My name is Yayin, which for those who don't know, is the Hebrew word for wine. My parents always told me they named me that because they so joyfully celebrated my arrival, but I sometimes suspect my name indicates they were celebrating that I would be the last of their children to be born. Nonetheless, I think my name helped me get my job at the Cana Cuisine and Catering Company. I am from the town of Cana in the Galilean region, not the most exciting place to grow up. So, I have always been glad for when there would be parties celebrating a birthday, a bar or bat mitzvah, a retirement – whatever! We also are a people who have lived in a state of oppression with an occupying force of Roman soldiers and officials who treat us harshly. It sometimes feels like we are being held hostage in our own communities without the possibility of a ransom being paid. Or their presence in our midst has been like an unwelcome illness that refuses to go away. They have killed significant numbers of our people and taken away much of our freedom. So celebratory gatherings are important to me. In my experience, when there has been no gathering going on, with nothing much to celebrate, life can be so lifeless.

There is one particular party I wanted to tell you about that was so unlike anything else I had ever experienced. This was a large wedding party at which I was working as a server. For those of you who don't know, weddings around here are the biggest of the celebrations. Our Jewish faith informs how we understand marriage as a covenant between two people that should reflect the kind of faithfulness and love demonstrated in God's covenant relationship with us as a people. In spite of the oppressive presence of you know who, we like to think that God cares about us as a people and is still in charge of things with a plan for our redemption. We like to think that God focuses on the big picture as well as the small picture, that it is God who brings two people together as a

couple committed to be a blessing to one another and to the broader community. The two families each get to express their love for one of their members taking this momentous step, and then those families are connected in seeking what is best for the couple. In the best of circumstances, that is all something to be celebrated. Now for the wedding itself, with people at times traveling several days to come to a wedding, it can't just be a brief ceremony followed by a toast and then it is over. There has to be plenty of food and wine for a long celebration to make it worth it for the people who walked all the way to little bitty Cana.

I've worked a lot of weddings, but like I said, there was this one that was so very different. Everything started out fine. The couple seemed to be just right for one another. The extended families thought this was a match made in heaven. I do think more people than expected showed up for the wedding. Some even came from as far as Nazareth and over by the Sea of Galilee. Communication is a problem, so it is always hard to know how many to expect and how to prepare for such an event. I imagine the groom's family was on a tight budget, so they didn't want to order too much. As the celebration went along, I suddenly realized that we were running out of wine. This was not a trivial thing. The families would want all to know this covenant relationship was indeed good news to be celebrated. And of course, you don't have to drink in order to celebrate, but the abundance of wine is a symbol of God's blessing for us, even with Hebrew scriptures that indicate the celebration of the long-awaited Messiah should be one that would include a feast of rich food and well-aged wines. So, you understand that running short on wine could mistakenly communicate that the families weren't invested in this union, or even worse, that God's blessing on the couple and the gathered community might run short.

There was a woman named Mary present at the wedding. I found out that she was a good friend of the groom's family. I didn't happen to know the groom's family like she did, so I asked her for advice on how to approach them with the bad news of this unfortunate shortage situation. She turned to her adult son, a guy named Jesus, to tell him of the concern. He seemed to indicate the predicament wasn't any of his business and said something about his hour not yet having arrived. I didn't understand what that meant – perhaps he had other more important priorities – I don't know. But the woman named Mary told the other

servants and me to do whatever her son would tell us to do. I didn't know what to expect – was this guy going to fork over a huge amount of money so the catering company could rush over some more wine? He didn't look like a rich person, but looks can be deceiving. Instead, this Jesus pointed us to six huge stone water jars that were used for religious rites of purification. Each of the jars could hold between twenty and thirty gallons. He told us to fill them up. I can't say I understood his directive at the time. Was he going to carry out some religious rite to distract the crowd from what they all lacked? I didn't know. But I am a servant. For whatever reason, I felt compelled to do what this man said to do. So, we got a bunch of buckets and took them on repeated trips to the well and filled up all six of those jars to the brim.

Then this Jesus told me to draw some of the water out of one of the jars in order to take it to the chief steward. I did not understand the purpose of this directive either, but I did as he had instructed me. I saw the chalice that the newly married couple had drunk from together and I put some of the water in it to take to the steward. This person had been very busy trying to meet the needs of the crowd and had not yet been made aware of the wine shortage. He took the chalice I brought and took a sip, I guess thinking that I was bringing him some wine to make sure it was good enough to serve. He got a look of amazement on his face and took another good sip. He went straight over to the groom and told him, "Everyone else serves the good wine first and then the inferior wine after everyone has become drunk. But you kept the good wine until now." Something truly amazing and beyond my comprehension had happened.

I scampered back to the large stone jars and sure enough, all six of them were filled to the brim, not with water, but with wine. There was such an abundance of wine that even those normally excluded from celebrations would be invited to join in. So, it was okay for us as servants to get to taste it. I have to tell you, I have had a little taste of the best of wine served at celebrations thrown by the wealthiest people around and never was their wine as good as this!

I looked back over at this man named Jesus, who was sitting joyfully talking with his mother and some of their friends. Who was this water-to-wine wizard? Was he just the person you would want to invite to your every party or was he someone much more significant than that? Beyond him, I could see some of the

Roman soldiers outside of the celebration, hanging around as if they wanted us all to remember there wasn't all that much to celebrate. The other servants and I were quick to bring this new wine to Jesus and all who were seated with him. As I served him, he took a cup, looked me in the eye, and raised his cup to me as if he knew my name, Yayin, wine. I have to say my name took on a fuller significance for me that day. Most of the people at the wedding party were unaware that something so amazing had happened. But the other servants and I knew who was responsible for it all, this one who had allowed us to have a small part in what felt like a holy drama. Not fully aware of the higher agenda we were serving, we just did what we were told to do by the right person. Somehow, this Jesus transformed not just the water, but even our efforts into something very special, a joyful service. Even with the presence of the soldiers nearby, that joy didn't run dry. All of us servants went back over to the large stone jars, took a cup of wine and raised it to the one who transformed so much that day so that even those who normally would be excluded could join in the celebration of God's abundant provision. In response to the toast, and in response to the presence of this amazing, holy man, all the servants joyfully cried out, "Hear, hear!"