

John 2:1-11
January 20, 2019

That

Many years ago I was leading bible study on this text about the wedding at Cana. Of course, one of the main features of the story is the sign itself, the turning of water into wine. It had to be seen to be believed I suppose. Every time I read it, however, I am captured by one of the other features of the story, the interaction between Jesus and his mother.

At best, the exchange is uncomfortably abrupt. John uses a difficult to translate idiom combined with an impersonal term that is rendered, “woman,” often softened by translators, which sounds to modern English-speaking ears to be an unbecoming way of speaking to one’s mother.

Anyway, I did not even have to mention this tension before someone in the class gave me a lesson on how to translate Greek into English. She was of the WW2 generation and had studied the bible all her life and was very familiar with this story. She said,

“Jesus didn’t really say that, he would not have spoken to her that way. I am sure the translators have made a mistake.”

I was fresh off of a Ph.D. in New Testament Studies and a Greek proficiency exam and thought it odd that she, who had never even seen a Greek New

Testament, would give me a Greek lesson, but I thought it best not to say anything. Over the years, however, I have come to believe that she is at least partly right. The phrase *is* untranslatable. Anyway it did not seem to bother Mary, she just told the servants to do what Jesus said.

The Vague This and That

Among the common translations you will find,

“Why do you involve me in this?”

“What is that to us?”

“That is not our problem”

A famous Baptist scholar, A. T. Robertson, called this phrase the use of the “ethical dative.” I have no idea what that means. Even after I looked it up I still had no idea what it meant, but I found curious the feature in these translations the use of the demonstrative pronouns “this,” and “that.”

The first thing that comes to mind when someone says “this” or “that,” is, “what?” Demonstrative pronouns are a form of definite pronouns that refer to a noun already mentioned, in other words, they have an antecedent.

I am reminded of a professor in seminary who always warned us against the use of what he called the, “vague this,” which occurs when the antecedent to the pronoun is not clear. He may as well have warned us

against the “vague that.” The curse is, of course, that since then I have always noticed and been annoyed when others I am reading commit the offense of being vague.

But sometimes vagueness can be strategic, like when the antecedent can't be summed up in words, when any name given to it diminishes it. It is the case with Jesus. Mary has involved him in this business about the wine, which is clear enough, except that it turned out to be a sign pointing to something much bigger and more complex.

Another part of what Jesus tells her is that the time isn't right, and she didn't seem to be bothered about those implications either. According to John, the whole public ministry of Jesus is inaugurated because she didn't want the wedding celebration to run out of wine.

Mary had no idea what she was calling forth. It was not simply a wedding feast, or a set of teachings or a doctrine, or even a crucifixion/resurrection event. It was a revolution of thought and action that came to characterize not only their lives but everyone's life, everywhere, and in every time.

That.

Frederick Buechner tells about a Zen master who had a stick in his hand and asked his student, “what have I got in my hand?” The student said, “it is a stick.” Then

the master hit him over the head with the stick and said, “no, *that's* what it is.” “*That*” is an encounter not reducible to words. It is an experience of such fullness that one can only look at it and marvel.

The Wedding

There, on that day when Mary felt sorry for the host of a wedding, who was presumably her friend, and told Jesus to help because the wine was running out, there, began the public side of a divine event that telling these stories can only begin to describe it. John tells it in terms of a few signs:

The water became wine

The deaf was able to hear

The lame could walk

The multitude was fed and the sea conquered

The blind was able to see

The dead man was raised

All the life that Jesus would live out in the presence of his disciples and friends he began to live that day when according to John the first sign happened. The water turned to wine.

Signs

But somehow saying, “the water turned to wine,” is not saying enough. John tells us that it was a sign, and

signs always point beyond themselves to some other reality:

The golden arches are not the same thing as a Big Mac. The yellow sea shell is not the same thing as a trip to see the ocean.

The changing of water to wine was not a magic trick but a revolution of life entering into a dying world. It pointed way beyond itself just like when a baby is born it is not just a name or a date or a length, but a new life, full of mystery too rich to describe. It was a “that.”

Jesus said to his mother, “What to me, and to you?” Whatever that means?

“That” was Jesus offering his life as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin, and an example of how to live meaningfully. “That” is God in transcendent mystery revealed as merciful, kind, compassionate, just, as love itself. “That” is the creative power of this vast indefinite universe known as a person with whom a relationship is possible. “That” is life given from nothing, apprehended by faith, demanded of us in everything we do.

It means that the end is better than the beginning, that there is nothing important about anything we do; no failure that is so powerful that it can hold sway over our lives, no accomplishment so good as to be meaningful

on its own. The only thing that matters is what God has done.

The irony, no matter what words we use for it; judgment, mercy, love, redemption; once whatever God has done has made its imprint on us and on our lives, then everything we do is infused with meaning. That is what “that” is. To put a word to “that” is to make it smaller, less grand, than it actually is.

Very often, I feel like I am in over my head because it is my calling to use words to describe what can't be described in words. So I could not help but take this opportunity to say, “that.” “That” is what all the fuss is about.

I will add that sometimes we look to science or nature for answers to our questions about meaning, yet we are still unable to understand, because even this universe, as majestic as it is, does not speak clearly enough about what “that” is.

Instead we encounter it in the ordinary events of daily life; weddings and funerals, births and graduations, work and play, the people we meet along the way; perhaps when someone has invited more people than they can serve, and we all get together to help, and in that moment a miracle happens that points beyond itself like a sign, to the wonder of our unbelieving eyes.

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