

Water Into Wine

Scripture: John 2:1-11

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January 8, 2012

Morning Service

People of God: It seems like such a simple miracle—turning water into wine—that I wondered what I could say about it, except the obvious—that Jesus turned water into wine. John, in his gospel, usually has an extended commentary on any miracle, as he weaves it into a teaching point. But not here. John has just a one-verse commentary in verse 11.

But this simple miracle story is a bit of a scandalous one for believers today. There are a number of elements in this story that makes many believers a little bit uncomfortable with what happened.

After all, we're dealing here with a miracle that really doesn't seem to be an urgent need. It's not like someone was sick, possibility even dying so that it was very urgent that Jesus step in do something. Nor are we dealing with a case of grave injustice that needed to be overturned. No, we're just dealing with a case of social faux pas—a social embarrassment. A mistake had occurred in terms of how much wine was needed for a wedding celebration.

Now, in the ancient world, social customs around weddings were very important. The banquet feast could last for days. The pressure was on the bridegroom to ensure the proper people were invited as well as for there to be an adequate supply of food and drink. To run short, as happened here, would be greatly embarrassing. But it wasn't a life or death issue. Yet a miracle is performed to save face.

That this miracle involves turning water into wine is a bit of an issue for believers who insist that alcohol is forbidden to Christians. Jesus turns water into wine—not grape juice, but wine. Now it is true that in the ancient world, wine was diluted with water so that it was one-third to one-tenth of its fermented strength. So it was a lot less potent than our modern wine.

But drink enough of it; it would still have an effect. As the master of the banquet says to the bridegroom: "Everyone brings out the choice wine

first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much wine to drink; but you have saved the best till now.” Now this would not be a drunken scene, but clearly if this occurred today the guests would not be in a position to drive. Yet Jesus supplies more wine.

Jesus does so at the request of his mother. She makes the comment, “They have no more wine.” We’re not quite sure what she expected Jesus to do about the situation, but she expected something. But Jesus’ response to her was quite curt and abrupt. “Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come.”

Jesus doesn’t address Mary, with a term you would expect, like mother. It’s hard to capture the tone of the Greek word, which is simply ‘woman.’ It’s not used as a discourtesy, but it’s not an endearing term either. The NIV softens it by translating it as ‘dear woman.’ There is distance created with the term. Mary cannot presume to have Jesus do her bidding because she is his mother. She needs to learn to be a disciple.

Jesus asks, “Why do you involve me?” Like the term “mother” it creates distance between the two people talking. The tone is not necessarily rude, but it is abrupt. Jesus is basically telling his mother that if he acts in this matter, it is not because of her, but because it will fit into God’s plan of his life. At the very beginning of his ministry, it is established that everything, including family ties, has to be subordinated to his divine mission.

That’s why Jesus adds: My time has not yet come. Throughout this gospel, this phrase refers to Jesus’ death on the cross. Everything Jesus says and does has to fit into the plan that will lead to Jesus’ death on the cross. And so when, Jesus acts in this situation, as he does, it has to be viewed in the light of his journey to the cross.

In other words, while Mary thought she could get Jesus to do a small favor by overcoming this social embarrassment, Jesus refuses to act on those terms. But Jesus will act in terms of his divine calling that will take him to the cross. For Jesus this act of turning water into wine is for more than helping out an embarrassed groom, it is a revelation of his mission on earth. It will be the beginning of revealing his glory that will climax on the cross. That’s why John adds the crucial interpretative verse 11: “This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory and his disciples put their faith in him.”

It is a sign. John always refers to Jesus’ miracles as signs. As a sign, these miracles are intended to point away from the act itself to something bigger. But what does turning water into wine point to? What more is going on?

Well, John himself provides an answer by saying, “He [Jesus] thus revealed his glory.” This too is a key theme in this gospel. As John’s Christmas text says, in 1:14, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Now, in turning water into wine, Jesus revealed his glory. The first of many signs that will lead to the ultimate sign, to the ultimate display of glory, Jesus’ death on the cross.

And all of this is intended to lead us to faith. That’s John’s whole purpose in writing this gospel. As he makes plain at the end (20:30): “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing you may life in his name.” After this first sign, the disciples did put their faith in Jesus. And so, this sign is also a call for us to put our faith in Jesus.

But how does this simple, even scandalous sign, of turning water into wine, reveal the glory of Jesus? How does it lead us to faith?

There some clues in our text to reveal that much more is going on than simply changing water into wine—though I suppose that this action in itself is enough to convince us that Jesus has power over nature. Who can change water into wine? Only someone who has the power of the Creator. But more is going on this simple display of power over nature.

The first clue is in the opening phrase, “on the third day.” It is very rare to have this type of notation in any of the gospels, so when it does it occur, you have to pay attention. Scholars have, asking though on the ‘third day of what?’ There are two options, which I don’t think are exclusive. They can both be at play here.

Option one: John has been mentioning the days in the previous chapter. At 1:29, 35, and 43 we come across the phrase, “the next day.” A careful counting of the days in that chapter makes this sign occur on the seventh day. Then, recall how this Gospel starts: In the beginning was the Word, which is a clear echo of Genesis One. Now we have seven days, an echo of the week of creation. On this seventh day, the Sabbath day, the day of rest, we have this sign of feasting. All this points to a theme of the NT that in Jesus we have a new creation.

Option two makes the same point but in a different way. It focuses on the phrase “third day”. It’s a phrase that is linked to the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the next section, when Jesus clears the temple, he was asked by what authority he did this. Jesus answered: Destroy this temple and I will raise it in three days. He was referring to his own body. And so we recite in the Apostles Creed, “on the third day” he arose again from the dead.

In this first sign, which allowed life to be enjoyed, we have the first arrow pointing to the eternal life we have in Jesus.

Whatever option you chose, and they are not exclusive—both can be at work in the text—the phrase “on the third day” points to the renewal of life and creation that we have in Jesus.

That’s why it is also significant that this first sign takes place at a wedding. After all, marriage is a fundamental part of the created order. Moreover, marriage and the wedding banquet that came with it was an important image for the Messianic kingdom. The OT prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, used the imagery of a bride and a bridegroom—a wedding—as a sign of God’s restoration of his people.

And specifically, the abundance of wine at the wedding feast was a sign of God’s blessings upon his people. The OT prophets speak about the day of God’s renewal of his people:

Joel 3:18 “in that day the mountains will drip with new wine.”

Amos 9:13 “The days are coming when... new wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills.”

Isaiah 25:6 “On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines.”

These were texts, God’s people in the days of Jesus thought about when they considered the day of God’s renewal for his people.

And now at a wedding banquet, Jesus turns water into wine, abundant wine, the finest of wines. One more detail to consider: Where was the water placed that was turned into wine? It came six stone jars that were used by the Jews for ceremonial washing. This was an important part of the OT system of worship. But now, the water in these jars that represent the Jewish system of laws and customs is turned into something better. In other words, in Jesus we have something better than the old Mosaic system of laws and customs.

Put all of these clues together—on the third day, a wedding banquet, water from ceremonial jars, to abundant wine—all these clues indicated something more is going on than just simply turning water into wine. We have the first sign that Jesus ushers in the Messianic age that God’s people of the OT were longing for. They were longing for the day, when their lives and their place in the creation would be renewed; when they would be able to enjoy life to the fullest; when they would experience the abundance of God’s blessings in their lives.

And in the coming of Jesus, this Messianic Age has begun. In Jesus, the glory of God is revealed. In Jesus, we can have life and enjoy life to the

fullest. That's what this sign points towards. It points to us to the life we can have in Jesus.

No wonder the disciples put their faith in Jesus. And so must we, if we want to have eternal life, if we want to enjoy life as God intended for us, if we want to experience life to the fullest—then we need to put our faith in Jesus.

This sign still point to us to the creative blessings of God. What Jesus does here is just a speeded up version of what happens every year. Scott Hoezee offers this comment: "As Augustine first observed—and as C.S. Lewis later on enjoyed pondering—what Jesus did at Cana was really no more than a speeded up version of what he does every year on a thousand hillsides as vines silently turns water into wine. Millions of people enjoy that wine every year without for a moment recognizing the divine origin of it all." But that sign is there for all to see and to enjoy.

But it seems like such a mundane thing: wine as a revelation of Jesus' glory. But maybe that's a reminder the glory of God is tied to the mundane things of life. This life we have in Jesus touches all aspects of our created existence. And this life is more than securing a place in heaven; it's about enjoying life in the present created order. And so maybe, we could see in the mundane parts of our lives, signs of the Messianic age.

And this sign is a reminder of the abundance that comes in Jesus. After all, Jesus didn't make just a case of wine, but hundreds of gallons. Not cheap, watery wine, but the best of the best. Jesus provided more than what was required. More than could be imaged. It is a snapshot of the abundant life we can have in Jesus.

Perhaps we don't always see this. Perhaps we don't always get to experience it in this broken world. But there are times when we get taste of what lies ahead when we will share in the great wedding feast in the new creation. And these glimpses of the future, with the eyes of faith, can be experienced even in the simple acts of life—like a glass of wine at a Christmas meal, or tubing down a mountainside, or stopping to see the cardinal come to the birdfeeder.

Signs that reveal the glory of our Savior and that call us to put our faith in him. Amen.