

## The First Sign

John 2: 1-11

Rev. Kathryn Escandell, First Presbyterian Church, McAllen, Texas

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Many biblical scholars who have written about this passage have put a lot of thought into drawing connections between this event early in John's Gospel and the Passion narrative which is the apex of the Gospel. The opening phrase of these verses, often translated as "On the third day", puts such scholars in mind of Jesus being raised from the dead "on the third day" after he is crucified. Some suggest that his form of address to his mother – "Woman" – foreshadows the moment when Jesus will establish a relationship between Mary and his disciple John by saying to Mary from the cross: "Woman, here is your son" and to John, "Here is your mother." And they contend that when he tells Mary at the wedding: "My time has not yet arrived" or "My hour is not yet come", he is seeking to conceal in Cana the divine identity and purpose which will later be revealed upon the cross and by the empty tomb.

This episode certainly includes intriguing hints and echoes and intimations of the crucifixion and resurrection – indeed, John's Gospel is from beginning to end full of intriguing hints and echoes and intimations about what the crucifixion and resurrection reveal about Jesus' identity and purpose. But I would like to disagree with the idea that this story of a wedding in Cana doesn't merit our full attention on its own. This is such a fascinating story – rich with information about the identity of Jesus and rich with implications about what that identity means for his companions – and for us.

We might, on first glance, think this an odd event for John to include in his account of Jesus. He began his Gospel with a sweeping, poetic panorama of the vast timelessness of creation and the deep mystery of divinity become flesh. Now he trades the lofty language of eternity and creation and grace upon grace for mundane, specific details: of time – the third day; of event – a wedding; of place – Cana of Galilee; and of participants – the mother of Jesus, Jesus himself and his newly recruited disciples along with the wedding party and other guests.

We might wonder why John chooses to tell us about this episode; the village wedding of people who are not identified in the text just doesn't hold the same level of significance as deity, creation, Incarnation, baptism, discipleship – the somber, important matters which occupy the first chapter of this Gospel. But as the story unfolds, we realize that it does indeed belong here for it is central to the fundamental question addressed by John's Gospel – "Who is Jesus?"

Every aspect of this story, every detail, every exchange contributes to John's layered response to this essential question.

One layer of identity is that Jesus is the Eternal Word become flesh to dwell among us as a real human being. He has a mother, as all humans have mothers. It is interesting that throughout his

Gospel, John consistently refers to Mary as “the mother of Jesus”, perhaps to emphasize that the divine Son of God is also the human son of a human mother.

Jesus attends a wedding with his mother and the men who have become his companions. Had all gone as planned at this wedding, we would never have known anything about it, for John isn’t recording Jesus’ social calendar; he is testifying to Jesus as the Messiah. It is when a problem arises in the course of the wedding festivities that this event gains its place in John’s witness to the identity and purpose of Jesus.

The wine runs out mid-wedding, which in the context of first-century Israel would have been a social calamity, bringing shame upon the marriage couple and their families. Theologian David Lose explains that “in this time and place, running out of wine too early isn’t a little embarrassing, it’s a disaster. Wine isn’t just a social lubricant, it’s a sign of the harvest of God’s abundance, of joy and gladness and hospitality. And so, when they run short on wine, they run short on blessing.”

Mary somehow becomes aware of what has happened, and she informs Jesus. The exchange between them is interesting and informative and problematic and confusing, but the outcome is that Jesus issues instructions to the servants and they comply.

Before we move on to those instructions, let’s pause at Jesus’ reply to Mary, which our translation today has tried to soften by having Jesus address Mary as “Dear woman” rather than simply “Woman” as the original text actually says. You may have been bothered by this verse through the years, thinking Jesus sounds a bit like a surly teen-ager when he speaks to his mother this way, but we should hear the term “Woman” as respectful; it is essentially the first-century Hebrew equivalent of calling our own mothers “ma’am” here in our modern-day context.

So, Jesus tells the servants to fill six nearby stone jars with water. These are large vessels used to provide water for ritual washing. Each holds 20 to 30 gallons. Remembering that there were no kitchen faucets or garden hoses available for the process, we realize that carrying 180 gallons of water from a well to those jars would take considerable effort and considerable time. But the servants accomplish it and now there are six jars filled to the brim with water. The wedding is still out of wine.

There’s a wonderful old cartoon of two scientists standing before a long chalk board where a great many complicated equations fill the left and right sides of the board. Between the equations is written: *Then a miracle occurs*. In the cartoon caption, one scientist says to the other, “You might want to be a bit more explicit here in Step Two.”

That cartoon reminds me of this story in John's Gospel, because it perfectly describes the way John tells the story. He sets up the transformation with careful detail – Mary, Jesus, servants, six stone jars, water – and then moves straight to the revelation of the completed miracle. The steward is given a cup of liquid from one of the stone jars – liquid which is now – somehow – wine. And not just wine, but excellent wine, markedly superior to all the wine which has been served before.

John isn't interested in the "how" of this transformation because his intent is to point to "who"; John tells us of a wedding in Cana to bring to light another layer of the identity of this Jesus of whom he writes. This One who is the Eternal Word through whom all things were made; this One who was with God during creation and who, having come to dwell among us, continues to have mastery over all the elements of the world he has created. Mastery which allows him to transform ordinary water into extraordinary wine.

We might, around this point in the story, want to ask: why so much? Six stone jars filled to the brim? Surely the wedding guests didn't need an additional 180 gallons of wine at this point in the celebration. But this isn't about refilling people's wine glasses. This is about the Messiah who has come to fulfill the prophecies. This is about opening for us a Kingdom of Heaven characterized by abundance, extravagance, joy. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the wedding banquet is frequently used as a symbol of the Messiah's arrival. We read in Isaiah: *As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride / so shall your God rejoice over you* (Is. 62:5). And an abundance of good wine is a sign of the joyous arrival of God's new age. The prophet Amos writes: *The time is surely coming, says the Lord ... when the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.* (Amos 9:13)

So, John tells this story of a wedding in Cana – a story rich in the symbolism of Jewish hope and expectation – to support his assertion that Jesus is the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scripture; to demonstrate that he is the divine Son of God. This is the identity toward which John always points. "All of the events narrated in his Gospel have this one purpose: to persuade [us] to believe and confess ... that Jesus is God's Son, the Christ, sent by God out of love for the world, to give enduring life to those who believe in him." (Okure, p. 1439)

John states explicitly that *Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him* (v. 11). Jesus transforms water into wine to show his disciples who he is, and John tells us about that transformation to show *us* who Jesus is. At the wedding, only Mary, the disciples, and the servants know what has happened. Everyone else, including the chief steward, simply think the bridegroom has opened up the good wine he had been holding in reserve. And they are allowed to remain unaware of the miracle – because, as Jesus says to Mary, the hour has not yet come for revealing his identity to the world. But that identity is revealed to those who are close to Jesus. We are invited to stand alongside the

disciples, to look, as they do with eyes of faith at this man they have committed to follow. We are invited to see, with them, the creative, transformative, extravagant love of Jesus reaching out to bless humanity.

William Barclay translates the final verse this way: *Jesus gave this first demonstration of the power of God in action in Cana in Galilee, and so displayed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.*

“The power of God in action” is made manifest at a village wedding where the host miscalculates the amount of wine needed to entertain his guests. We might be tempted to suggest that running out of wine isn’t really a circumstance that justifies God’s glory and creative power being brought to bear in the person of Jesus; that this situation doesn’t deserve to be the setting for the first sign of Jesus’ glory. But if we deem as unworthy this opportunity for Jesus to bless human life, how do we decide which situations are worthy of blessing? When we begin to calculate which aspects of our lives are dignified and important enough to merit Christ’s miraculous presence and which are not, we have forgotten that Christ is Lord of *all life*, and we are invited to share with him our celebrations, our sorrows, our daily routines and every moment and movement in between. Jesus was invited to a wedding in Cana of Galilee. He accepted that invitation and blessed that gathering. So too will he accept our invitations to be in and among us, responding to our hopes and needs; bringing abundance into our days; loving us always – this Jesus who is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God whose glory has come to dwell with us.

Amen