

“The First Sign”
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Psalm 36:5-10

John 2:1-11

There’s a classic story from the days of the *Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*. On this particular night, Johnny was interviewing an eight-year-old boy. The young man was asked to appear because he had rescued two friends in a coal mine outside his hometown in West Virginia. As Johnny questioned the boy, it became apparent to him and the audience that the young man was a Christian. So Johnny asked him if he attended Sunday school. When the boy said he did, Johnny inquired, “What are you learning in Sunday school?” “Last week,” came his reply, “our lesson was about when Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine.” Johnny said, “And what did you learn from that story?” The boy squirmed in his chair. It was apparent he hadn’t thought about this. But after thinking about it for a moment, he lifted up his face and said, “If you’re going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!”

I think that’s pretty good advice – inviting Jesus to your wedding is always a good plan, but maybe for more than just in case you run out of refreshments. I think we all too often try to leave Jesus out of our everyday lives, and just invite him to be with us on Sundays. But this actually isn’t a sermon about weddings or marriages. Yes, there is a wedding as a central part of the story, but that isn’t the focus of this passage.

The story is something of an odd one, isn’t it? The last verse of our passage for today tells us that this was Jesus’ first sign. Now, John never uses the term “miracle” – he calls them instead “signs” and they function the way that signs are supposed to; they point toward something. It’s just a bit difficult to see what it is that this first sign is pointing toward.

Jesus' mother seems to know what Jesus is capable of here. Other than her, though, this is the first time that anyone had a glimpse of the miraculous power of Jesus and it's not something big and showy like the feeding of the 5000 or bringing Lazarus back from the dead. It's not even something that most people at the wedding see. John tells us that only the servants and the disciples knew what happened. No, the first miracle of Jesus isn't something big and showy. The first miracle of Jesus is providing the drinks at a party.

Today's weddings are often very big deals – and rightly so. The weddings of Jesus' day, though, were even bigger affairs. To a people living under Roman oppression, there was often not much to celebrate. A wedding gave the people a chance to get together and rejoice and even the poorest of the poor would come together to celebrate. These celebrations were quite a big deal, often lasting seven days or more. Yes, seven *days*! In that cultural setting, the groom's family was responsible for the wedding celebration and in this case, someone messed up. Someone miscalculated how much wine was going to be needed for this party and they ran out. This would be a major *faux pas* – an embarrassment to the groom's family and also a very bad start to the marriage. In a culture based on honor, the groom's family's social standing would be quite harmed. Many would have believed that the couple's life together was cursed from the start. And so, someone needed to run down to the corner liquor store and pick up refreshments – except that there wasn't a corner liquor store, of course. So, Mary, the mother of Jesus, understands all of this and wants the family to not experience this embarrassment and this bad beginning to the marriage. Some scholars believe that Mary was related to the groom's family and so perhaps she also was trying to protect her own honor, as well.

Whatever the case, she says to Jesus simply "They have no wine." This is one of those statements that couples or family members might say to each other. It conveys information, but it really conveys a not-so-subtle suggestion – *do something* about it! Mary wasn't just making sure

Jesus knew they were out of wine; she was saying “And now I need you to fix this problem, son!” But Jesus does not jump to action. No, He hesitates and talks about it being bad timing. He tells his mother, “My hour has not yet come.” Maybe Jesus was thinking about performing one of those much larger signs as his first miracle – feeding the 5000 or raising the dead. *This* is not the time to start! Once He starts, the clock starts ticking – the crowds will start to come, the authorities will start to investigate, and the path to Calvary will have begun. But Mary doesn’t even respond to Jesus’ hesitation. She turns and says to the others “Do whatever He tells you.” And Jesus responds to the need.

John tells us that there were six stone water jars there and they were supposed to be filled with water for the Jewish purification rites. Ritual purity was of major importance to the Jews. The guests would be required to wash up, not just from the dirt of their travels, but to ritually wash themselves before eating the meal. But Jesus turns these instruments of the laws of ritual purification into something different. He asks that the jars be filled with water and then when some of the liquid is drawn out, the chief steward discovers that it is wine. And not just wine, but *really good* wine! The instruments of the law are turned into bearers of joy. The party will not be a failure; the hosts will be saved embarrassment and the marriage will get off to a good start. No one but the servants see how this miracle is accomplished. Jesus does not make a big show about it and apparently it does not have a large effect on those gathered, except for the disciples. John tells us that in doing this first sign, Jesus revealed His glory and His disciples believed in Him. He didn’t convert anyone that day. No one was added to the church rolls. Instead, Jesus used the opportunity to deepen the faith of His followers – and to deepen the joy of the people at a celebration.

The wedding is the first sign of the new day that God is bringing about through Jesus Christ. The other signs in the book of John also point to this new thing that God is doing. The whole world

will change and nothing will be the same ever again. In the book of John, Jesus performs seven signs, starting with turning water into wine and leading up to the raising of Lazarus. The signs increase in difficulty and significance and yet none of them is used to convert anyone. John even tells us in Chapter 12, verse 37: “Although he had performed so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him.”

So, what was the point? Why did John even tell us about this event? Perhaps it is to show us of God’s transforming power in love. If Jesus can turn water into wine, what is it that we have that needs to be transformed by the power of God’s love? Is there anything that God cannot do? It is our job to do as Mary said to the servants “Do whatever He tells you.” We may not understand what it is that He is telling us to do. When Jesus told the servants to fill the jars with water, can you imagine what they had to be thinking? *OK, we are out of wine and this guy thinks that people will be fooled with ordinary water?! There’s no way this is going to work. The people aren’t that drunk!* But the text mentions no hesitation on their part. In verse 7, John tells us: “Jesus said to them, ‘Fill the jars with water.’ And they filled them up to the brim.” That’s it – Jesus said to do something and they simply did it and the results were miraculous.

Our calling today is to offer ourselves completely to Christ, to turn ourselves over to Him, to trust Him with our lives. For though Jesus did perform a miracle that day, He didn’t start with *nothing*. He didn’t create wine from thin air; He started with water and created an abundance of wine. It was the same with the feeding of the 5000. He started with a small amount of food, and created an abundance of food. He works the same with us. We may feel our gifts of time, talent and money are small, but they provide that starting point. They provide something for Jesus to work with; something from which to create an abundance.

When I look at the world around, when I see the poverty and illness and violence and hatred and disunity, sometimes I get overwhelmed. I can feel very small. I wonder what I can do

in the face of such a fallen world. Maybe you do, as well. But if God works with and through us by starting with something small and creating abundance, then maybe we do have a role. Maybe the prayers that we send up on behalf of hurting people are a building block. Maybe the money we give today is a starting point. Maybe our helping out a neighbor in need is a way to begin. Maybe God can take these little things that each of us can provide and can create abundance out of them. There is suffering, strife, and discord in so many places around our world. But we can make a difference. Each of us in our own way can make a big difference. We can all be part of that material that Jesus works with to do great things. That is part of the message of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday our country recognizes tomorrow. He knew that we are all united together, despite the way that we try to separate ourselves. We sometimes see that more clearly in times of suffering, when we feel the pain of others in far-off places in the aftermath of a massive earthquake or tsunami, but we are always tied together with one another. Dr. King said "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." When we see suffering around the corner or around world, it affects others directly, but it affects us indirectly. Fifty-two years after Dr. King's "I Have A Dream" speech, racism and discord is still rampant, and since we are all "tied in a single garment of destiny," we are all harmed by it. But the good news of the gospel is that the same principle works in reverse. What we do here for good affects those who are suffering elsewhere. When we send up prayers to God Almighty, we affect those who are suffering all around the world. When we contribute our gifts, financial and otherwise, however large or small they may be, we can make a difference in the lives of others. When we speak out against racism, xenophobia, and other forms of injustice, we are making a difference in the lives of people we may never meet. When we work, side-by-side and hand-in-hand, God can use that as a starting point to make a miracle happen.

We are here to be used by God. We are like the water sitting in those stone jars, ready to be changed and transformed by the power of Christ into a new wine of the Spirit, filling the world with words of hope, acts of love, and songs of joy. Let us be a sign of the Christ in our world.

Amen