

The Wedding at Cana
John 2:1-11
Epiphany 2, Year C January 19, 2024
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Good morning, friends. As we start into this season after Epiphany, we will see today the first of the seven “signs” that Jesus does, according to the Gospel of John. These are actually miracles, which are defined as extraordinary occurrences that demonstrate God's power and presence in the world. Why does John refer to them as signs when it's obvious that God's power has been shown? The short answer is that the purpose of a sign is more far-reaching than a miracle. It points beyond itself. Here's what John wrote about signs:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

We will not be encountering the other six signs, in our sermons, but if you want to check them out, here are the references: Healing the Nobleman's Son (John 4:46-54); Healing the Man at the Pool (John 5:1-11); Feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:1-15); Walking on Water (John 6:16-21); Healing a Man Born Blind (John 9:1-12); and Resurrecting Lazarus (John 11).

The key, then, to the signs is that they don't just show God's power but they also promote belief in Jesus. We'll see how that plays out at the end of today's reading, which is a familiar story to many of you. In this inaugural event of his ministry, according to John, Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding to which he, his mother, and his disciples had been invited. We don't know what relationship they had to the bride and groom. All we know is that they were present. Weddings are joyous occasions that bring people together to celebrate the creation of a new family. The family hosting a wedding provides lavish hospitality. In Jesus' day, wine flowed freely for a week-long celebration. The host family had to be prepared to provide enough for everyone on the guest list...a list that often included an entire town.

Notice that this wedding takes place in the small town of Cana in Galilee, a place known to include rebels and thieves among its residents. This small backwater is where Jesus lived as an adult. But what is God trying to tell us by allowing Jesus' first miracle to occur in a place like Cana? Dr. Eliseo Perez-Alvarez offers a compelling observation:

God chose a small village [Bethlehem] in a tiny, insignificant country for the Son's incarnation. This is precisely where Jesus begins his pastoral work, in order to communicate this message clearly: big is not a synonym of great, small is not interchangeable with insignificant. The Nazarene put Cana on the map! As a result, empires do not have the last word. (“Working Preacher,” 2016).

Jesus was not trying to impress anyone with his residence. Nor was he trying to impress anyone when he turned water into wine. Only a few people even knew what he had done. And they were not the rich and powerful. They weren't even members of the wedding party's family. They were simply servants. But they knew that what Jesus had done made a huge difference! No, it didn't stop a war, but it saved a family from embarrassment and shame had they not been able to provide generously for their guests.

Dr. Perez-Alvarez's words prompted me to stop and think for a bit, recalling the comments I

heard when I first arrived at the Choptank Charge about how the three congregations were just small country churches. And so you were, and so you remain, though we have taken in 28 new members. But our small size definitely does not mean that you are in any way insignificant or unimportant to God! I do understand that with all the emphasis on church growth through the years that it would seem as if a small, rural church just isn't cutting the mustard. I can recall how as a volunteer workshop leader I would try to help small congregations find ways to grow, both numerically and spiritually. I stand by the need to grow spiritually, but I've realized since coming here that the Neck District can be Dorchester County's version of Cana or Bethlehem. We are small, but we are definitely NOT insignificant. Assuredly, we're not the Washington National Cathedral where state funerals and elaborate services take place. But here, everybody knows your name. Many of you are related to one another, or went to school with each other, or participated in sports together. And from all that I can observe, everybody looks out for everybody else. The loving relationships that are so evident here—both with those you have known for a lifetime, as well as newcomers like me— are what make our churches so special. Everyone is welcomed and made to feel included. I do believe that everyone is invited to be part of the kingdom of heaven. Whether you accept the invitation is up to you...but you are invited. And I think our churches, with doors wide open, provide a way for each one of us to practice kingdom hospitality, to reach out to others in the love of Jesus, even as we ourselves are being cared for. We're getting ready for the heavenly banquet that God will host. Salvation and wine will be available to all of us in abundance (Isaiah 25:6). In fact, wine symbolizes the very presence of God (Joel 3:17-18).

Moving back to today's Scripture lesson, we read that Jesus was a very reluctant participant in this first miracle/sign. His mother Mary, who is actually unnamed in John's Gospel and only appears here and at the foot of the cross, called his attention to the lack of wine. His answer to her sounds very rude to our ears. He's basically telling her that the host's predicament was not their problem. The reason for his unwillingness to help was that his "hour had not yet come" (2:4). This "hour" of course, refers to the event of his death, resurrection, and ascension, which is still about three years in the future. Mary ignores her son, telling the servants that they should do whatever he tells them.

At that point, Jesus goes ahead and gives the servants directions. He ordered them to fill to six stone jars used for purification rites. Each held 20 to 30 gallons of water. By our standard measures, Jesus made about 1000 bottles, or 2400 glasses, of wine. This had to be an extravagant amount for a small-town wedding!

When the chief steward tasted the liquid, he was astonished. The servants who drew what they thought was water from the jars knew that Jesus had done something to them. But this miraculous sign was only made know to that small handful of lowly servants. The chief steward commented to the bridegroom that this wine was better than that which was served first. Since these wedding receptions lasted for days, it was customary for the host to serve his best wine first and then, when the guests were suitably drunk, roll out the inferior wine. But that's not what happened here! Jesus not only increased the quantity of the wine but he also increased its quality. The finest wine was being served to the guests whose palates were, shall we say, unable to taste much of anything! Notice that when the steward comments about the high quality, the host makes no reply. Perhaps he was as awestruck as everyone else was concerning what had happened. But let's be honest: There is no rational explanation for what had

happened. It truly is a miracle, but it's so far outside the "boxes" of the steward and host's imaginations that they really have no explanation for what has occurred.

In contrast to these two who were apparently stymied by the inexplicable event, Jesus' disciples realized that he was revealing his glory (2:11). And for them, this became the sign that prompted them to believe in Jesus. (2:11). This miracle had fulfilled its purpose as a sign to encourage people to believe in Jesus.

Let's be clear that the miracle/sign, not the wedding itself, is the focus of today's Scripture. We know absolutely nothing about the bride and groom, but we really don't need to know them. John's spotlight is on the miraculous transformation of water into wine. This is the first sign that we have concerning who Jesus is. But why are we told this now? If we look back to John 1:50, we overhear Jesus telling his disciples, "you will see greater things than these." Soon after that comment, we are already witnessing a "greater thing" in John 2:1-12.

As important as this sign is for the spiritual growth of the disciples, we recognize that this story also has far deeper theological implications. Gail R. O'Day reminds us:

In the Old Testament, an abundance of good wine is an eschatological [which means, end time] symbol, a sign of the joyous arrival of God's new age (Amos 9:13; Joel 3:18). This eschatological symbolism suggests that John 2:1-11 can be read as more than just the first act in Jesus' ministry. It also stands as the fulfillment of Old Testament eschatological hopes as the inaugural act of God's promised salvation (*New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, page 538).

In other words, the Jewish people had for years been awaiting a sign that the long-awaited Messiah had arrived. Since wine can be the symbolic presence of God, this miracle is showing that God is indeed on the scene. Yes, here he is, in the person of Jesus. He is the one who has come to earth to fulfill God's promise of salvation. And this highly significant but private act of turning water into wine reveals the presence of the Savior. As we said last week, the purpose of the season after Epiphany is to remind us of the ways in which Jesus' identity has been made known to people. We've seen how the Gentile Magi were made aware of who Jesus is. And last week at his baptism, we saw the heavens open as a voice proclaimed Jesus to be the beloved son. This week, we see that by his miraculous act, Jesus revealed his glory to his disciples, who then believed.

I have to wonder: What do we have to experience to come to believe in Jesus? In our United Methodist tradition, we know that some folks come to Jesus as if a bolt of lightning had struck them. Others decide to follow him after searching for a considerable time. Still others of us were fortunate enough to grow up in Christian homes where the love of the Lord and his teachings were always available to us. Think about your own experience of saying "yes" to Jesus. How often, and under what circumstances, do you reaffirm that "yes"?

One way we can renew our commitment to Christ is by reaffirming our baptism. This sacrament, which is done at God's initiative, cannot be repeated, but we can at any time say "yes" again to Jesus by remembering our baptism.

Another way we can renew our commitment is by participating in the sacrament of Holy Communion. As we partake of the elements, we can experience the presence of the living Christ. No, we do not believe as some traditions do that that bread and wine are literally turned into the body and blood of Jesus. But this sacrament is more than simply recalling what happened on the night of what we call Maundy (or Holy) Thursday. We do this in memory of

Jesus, but it is more than a service of remembrance. Even though we cannot explain how it's possible, we do believe that Jesus is truly present with us in these very ordinary elements.

Can you see a connection here between Communion and the account of Jesus turning water into wine? Wine, of course, signifies Jesus' blood (even if we United Methodists use grape juice). So there are Communion overtones in today's story, although not overtly stated. We see such connections soon again as Jesus feeds the 5000 (6:1-14). After performing this gracious act as another sign that reveals who he is, Jesus teaches that he is "the bread of life" (6:35). And Communion, or the Eucharist as it is called in many churches, puts us in touch with Jesus in a very sensory way. We can see, feel, taste, touch, and smell the bread and wine.

This miracle/sign business is pretty heavy stuff, isn't it? So I want to close with a story told by Rev. Martin Dale that relates to today's Scripture in a more light-hearted way:

Some years ago when Johnny Carson was the host of the well-known American chat show, *The Tonight Show*, he interviewed an eight-year-old boy. The boy was asked to appear because he had rescued two friends in a coal mine outside his hometown in West Virginia.

As Carson questioned the boy, it became apparent to him and the audience that the young man was a Christian. So Carson asked him if he attended Sunday school.

When the boy said he did Johnny inquired, "What are you learning in Sunday school?"

"Last week," the boy replied, "our lesson was about when Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine."

The audience roared with laughter, but Carson tried to keep a straight face. Then he 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 then he broke into a smile and said, "If you're going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!"

What a wonderful insight! Actually, if you going to do anything at all, make sure that Jesus is right there with you. This child, who had already risked his life to save his friends, knew who Jesus was...and he wasn't afraid to say so in front of a large television audience. What about you? Your challenge this week is to tell someone about the Jesus you know.

Love, Nan