

Jesus in the Gospel of John

“The Signs of Jesus - Part 1”

[John 2:1-12](#)

Last Sunday, we looked at how the Gospel of John is very different from the other three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are grouped together and known as the Synoptic Gospels because of the similarities that exist among them. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus often speaks in parables, but in John’s Gospel, we find no parables. Instead, Jesus encounters us through metaphorical stories or allegories, which demand us to slow down and read the text more carefully. In the Gospel of John, we are invited to dive deeper in order to seek out the meaning beneath the surface of the text.

The details of each story and the recorded sayings of Jesus found in the Gospel of John are not meant to provide an accurate historical account of Jesus, but rather to paint a picture of the spiritual significance of Jesus’ life. So, when we read a story from John’s Gospel, we must consider how each word or phrase symbolically points toward Jesus’ life and ministry, his identity and mission.

While the Synoptic Gospels are filled with stories of the many miracles that Jesus performed, the Gospel of John records only 7 miracles. Perhaps it’s no coincidence to discover that, in ancient times, the number 7 was considered to represent the wholeness or completeness of God. Even today, the number 7 is viewed as a lucky number.

And, here are the seven miracles we find in John: Jesus turns water into wine at the wedding at Cana (2:1-12); He heals the royal official’s son (4:46-54); He heals the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem (5:1-15); He feeds the five thousand (6:5-14); He walks on water (6:16-21); He heals the man born blind (9:1-7); and He raises Lazarus from the dead (11:1-45). Rather than calling them miracles, John refers to them as “miraculous signs” or simply “signs.” They are all found within chapters 2-11, with some biblical scholars calling this section the “Book of Signs.”

Signs tell us or point us to something important for us to know. There are many different signs on the road. You know these: there is the stop sign, the exit sign, the no turn on red sign, the speed limit sign, the caution -- deer crossing sign, and on and on. We all know that, whether you are walking or driving, it’s important to pay attention to signs on the road. If you ignore them, you can get yourself lost or get an expensive ticket, or worse, get into an accident.

While most signs are helpful, sometimes the signs we encounter can be unclear and lead to confusion. Actually, some time ago, members of our church pointed out that not all of the signs in our church campus were clear, visible, or attractive. Some signs were hard to read because they were too small. And this is how the signage committee was formed. Its members have been working together to improve our signs. Some progress has been made, but the committee members will be the first to tell you that we still have a long way to go to achieve our goal of making our church campus reflect the radical hospitality of Jesus. Their current project is to make our church campus a more welcoming place for our visitors and new members through the use of better campus map signage. So, if you have any suggestions or comments about the signs you see around our church campus, feel free to write them down on the attendance slip.

Like the signs we encounter out in the world, the signs in the Gospel of John serve an important function. They help us to stay on the right path of believers.

But more importantly, they point to the identity of Jesus and reveal truths about him. Today and continuing on to next Sunday, we will be reading and reflecting on two of the 7 signs in John's gospel. Today, we turn to the first sign: Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana.

Jesus and his disciples were invited to a wedding in Cana. Jesus' mother was also there. In every culture, a wedding is celebrated with abundance and generosity. There is always more than enough food and drink at a wedding banquet. Nowadays, the wedding reception is limited to a certain number of guests through RSVPs, and it lasts only for a few hours. But, in the first century, many Jewish wedding celebrations lasted a week. Wedding banquets were prepared for many guests because often the whole town was invited. The people of the community came together day after day to eat and drink and be happy.

In the story, we hear that the unthinkable happened: the wine ran out! Why did the wine run out? Did the host miscalculate the number of guests who would come? Was it such a good party that people kept staying for that one last drink? We do not know. Regardless, clearly, this was going to be a big embarrassment for the wedding host, for it was impossible to continue the celebration without wine.

And this is where Jesus' mother comes in. She finds Jesus and tells him that there was no more wine. What Jesus says to her in response certainly sounds strange to our modern ears, doesn't it? He says, "*Woman, what does that have to do with me? My time has not come yet.*" You might be wondering why Jesus was talking this way to his mother. His response sounds harsh. The use of *Woman* to refer to his mother sounds particularly abrupt. However, we know that Jesus uses the title "woman" elsewhere in the Gospel of John (4:21) and other Gospels in order to address women with no malice or intention of being rude (Matthew 15:28, Luke 22:57). It seems to be a title of dignity. And actually, the rest of his response would not have been considered rude or hostile in his day. What he said was a common Semitic expression. It was used to imply a sense of disengagement between Jesus and his mother, creating a sense of distance between the two. The next sentence shows the reason for this disengagement and distancing from his mother: his "time has not come yet."

Then, Jesus' response is followed by Jesus' mother's response, which makes all of us mothers smile. She ignores what Jesus just said to her and instructs the servers at the wedding to "Do whatever he tells you." That's interesting, isn't it? Did he not just tell his mother, "My time has not come yet"? Yet, Mary knows her son very well. So, Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with water. Yes, he changed his mind! We don't know exactly what moved Jesus to act. John does not tell us. But, remember? We can search for deeper meaning here. We can look for what the sign is pointing us towards.

In *Feasting on the Word*, Ernest Hess writes "Although Jesus acts freely, with divine sovereignty, the text implies that his mother's statement of human need has influenced the timing of this hour. Can our honest statement of human need to God in prayer influence the course of events? Can a measure of what will come to fulfillment only in the eschatological 'hour of glorification' be drawn into the time of present need? The text suggests that this is a possibility" (263).

John gives us details about the jars that the servants filled with water. “Nearby were 6 stone jars used for the Jewish cleansing ritual, each able to hold about twenty or thirty gallons” (John 2:6) The 6 stone water jars were for Jewish purification, ceremonial washing. People used the water to wash their hands before eating and to wash their cups and utensils. In Hebrew, the number 6 means imperfection and incompleteness. So, the 6 empty jars used for the Jewish cleansing ritual represent the Jewish Law -- implying that it had become an empty ritual. Through this sign, Jesus symbolically fills the dead Jewish law with his Gospel of life. This detail recalls God’s promise found in Old Testament scripture. In Ezekiel, God says, “I will remove your stony heart from your body and replace it with a living one.” (Ezekiel 36:26).

How about the religious rituals we engage in today? Sunday after Sunday, we come to worship. We greet one another. We sing songs. We pray the Lord’s Prayer. We listen to the sermon. We give offerings. Are our rituals living, filled with joy? Or are they dry and empty, in need of replenishing?

In the Old Testament, wine is often viewed as a sign of God’s goodness, joy, and celebration. In this first sign of Jesus, wine symbolizes the new life he offers. It is a life of peace, hope, love, and joy. It is the life you find in Jesus Christ when you allow him to be your Lord.

The over-abundance of wine that we find with this sign is important to highlight. The wine Jesus created from the water was not just any sort of wine; it was that really good, Napa/Sonoma valley wine. It was better than the wine the wedding guests had been drinking. When the master of the banquet tasted this new wine, he said to the groom, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink. But you have saved the best till now.”

And, the new wine, the good stuff that had been saved, was plentiful. Each water jar could hold about 20-30 gallons, and the servants filled all 6 jars to the brim. So, they were 120-180 gallons of new wine for the wedding party to enjoy! The Old Testament prophecies of the messianic age predicted an abundance of wine, an image of celebration that was expected with the appearance of the Messiah. Joel foretold, “... the mountains will drip sweet wine” in the coming messianic age (Joel 3:18). God’s mercy and grace will be abundant and overflowing, was their proclamation.

One more point to be made. The original readers of John’s Gospel were familiar with the pagan deities. One of these deities was called Dionysus in Greek and Bacchus in Roman. He was the god of wine and mirth. There was a large cult in Ephesus dedicated to Dionysus. Dionysus promised a life of joy and happiness. But, this god also had some bad attributes, such as anger, rage, and drunkenness. There is a story that Dionysus was able to change water into wine. So, when people who knew about Dionysus and believed in his power heard this story of Jesus turning water into wine, they could perfectly understand John’s point. John was telling them that Jesus was more powerful than Dionysus, and that the wine Jesus offered was better, more abundant and of higher quality. In their minds, they must have understood the story of Jesus turning water into wine as proof that Jesus came with power and authority -- the power to take back from the pagan world the illusion of its power to transform. The difference between the two was this. While Dionysus was just a mythological figure, Jesus was of flesh and blood, a man who lived in the world, among people.

You might be wondering “if John really meant for us to interpret the stories so metaphorically and symbolically... this type of interpretation may seem too tenuous” and too poetic (Adam Hamilton, *John The Gospel of Light and Life*, 37). But, you will find that the more you read the Gospel of John, the more you will find that the stories in this unique Gospel have a deeper, richer meaning beneath the surface. This is why many New Testament scholars devote their whole lives digging in the gold mine that is John’s Gospel.

May we join in their quest, discovering the abundant richness that the signs point towards. May we continue to read this special gospel with keen eyes of faith this Lent and encounter Jesus in a whole new, different way! Amen.