

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE, BUT NOT A DROP OF WINE”

Scripture Lesson: John 2: 1-11

*This sermon was preached by Mary B. Robinson on Sunday, January 19, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

The Wedding at Cana

1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” 4 And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” 5 His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” 6 Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7 Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. 8 He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it. 9 When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.” 11 Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Water, Water Everywhere, But Not a Drop of Wine

Leader: The Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable and pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and redeemer.

Well, this Gospel reading sounds like a straightforward, easy to understand story, doesn't it? Actually, after we unpack it, you will see a much deeper meaning than we get at first reading.

What is the first thing you think about when you hear the word "*miracle*"? Is it Moses parting the Red Sea or maybe a loved one being cured of a terminal disease when there was seemingly no medical hope? Or perhaps it's your favorite football team coming from behind at the last minute to win the national championship?

We use the word *miracle* to describe different scenarios, do we not? While the illustrations I just mentioned in some sense, can be described as *miracles*, the definition of *miracle* is as follows: An effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause.

That is to say that *miracles* are those things which happen beyond the realm of human possibility and can only be attributed to God or to some sort of gods.

The Bible, of course, is filled with miracle stories from both the Old and New Testaments- like as we mentioned earlier, the parting of the Red Sea, how about Aaron's rod turning into a serpent, or the manna from Heaven and many more? Then in the New Testament we have the 37 miracles of Jesus and He wasn't even the only one to perform miracles.

In John's Gospel, the writer writes about seven specific miracles, several of which occur only in John's Gospel. Interestingly enough, John does not refer to these supernatural actions as miracles, but rather as "signs". He does this because he understands these events to be more than simply the working of wonders. He does this because he believes they point beyond themselves to something far greater.

In his Gospel, John tells us about seven specific "signs". Jesus performed far more than seven signs or miracles, of course, but John has chosen to only write about these particular ones. As you probably remember, the number "seven" is considered the perfect number, or the number of completeness. To John, these seven signs reveal the completeness or perfection found in Jesus and His mission.

So, John begins telling us about the "seven" signs that Jesus did, with the first sign occurring in the small village of Cana, not far from Jesus' hometown of Nazareth.

John writes: On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and a few of his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. Weddings were big events in those days and involved the whole community as usually everyone was invited. The whole village probably had a population of no more than a few hundred. Plus, family and friends who had to travel by foot from further out. Jews did not celebrate birthdays or anniversaries, so social events were rather rare, making weddings all the more special and lengthy, lasting a whole week. That's a lot of food and drink! We don't know the details of the wedding, but it appears that the groom may have been related to Jesus' mother Mary- possibly a nephew.

While everyone was celebrating, Mary discovers that the supply of wine has been exhausted. To run out of food or drink at a wedding celebration, then or today, is an embarrassing faux pas but in those days, it was particularly embarrassing because they lived in a culture governed by shame and honor. To run out of wine at such a time would bring shame upon the groom's parents, who were the hosts, and even upon the groom and bride as well. It could result in such a social stigma that would be a blemish on the entire family. The couple would always be known as the "couple who ran out of wine at their wedding." Oddly enough, you could actually sue people for running out of wine at a wedding in those days.

Sensing a disaster in the making, Mary went to Jesus and perhaps under her breath says, "They have no wine." "Do something". We have no clear idea what Mary expected Jesus to do, but she had lived with him for thirty years and knew of his wisdom and figured he could do something to resolve this problem. What else could Jesus do but perform a miracle, a "sign". The availability of more wine and on such a short notice would have been virtually impossible to secure in the small village of Cana.

Jesus' response to Mary has long puzzled scholars because his words can be interpreted as rather abrupt and disrespectful. Remember how Jesus replied to his mother: "Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come." On the one hand he seems to be saying, "That's not my problem", but on the other hand, he may be saying, "I'm not sure what it is that you want me to do".

Scholars do agree that Jesus is socially distancing himself from Mary, as he seeks to understand his role as "Son of God", and not simply the "son of Mary".

Furthermore, Jesus' reference to his hour not yet coming is a reference to his future crucifixion, the true focus of his life so he may well have been hesitant to perform a miracle in front of all the wedding guests, and rightfully so. For one thing, such an open display of his powers would have taken the limelight away from the bride and groom on their special day. Jesus would have quickly become the focus of the event. Even more important is the fact it likely would have labeled Jesus as a wonder worker, a magician of sorts.

Jesus would soon become a worker of miracles of course, but he would become so much more than that although of the 80 miracles in the New Testament, half of those were performed by Jesus. Jesus is intent that nothing stands in the way of his accomplishing his purpose and mission which was to go to the cross. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is revealed as one for whom timing is critically important. And now, here he is, just beginning his public ministry and faced with having to perform a miracle.

Back to Mary- while Jesus is surveying the situation, Mary tells the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

John goes on to tell us that standing nearby there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each jar holding 20 or 30 gallons. These rites of purification were not mandated by Biblical law, but rather part of the laws that the Pharisees and Sadducees initiated. Remember, people had walked a long way to attend this wedding and if it was dry and dusty, or wet and muddy, their feet would need to be washed so I imagine that the water left in the jars was quite dirty.

The expensive stone jars instead of less expensive earthen clay jars were solid stone each holding 20-30 gallons. Jesus says to the servants, "Fill the jars with water". They filled them up to the brim. Then Jesus instructed the servants to draw some of the water out and to take it to the chief steward which they did. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew) - the steward called the bridegroom and said to him: "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." So miraculously the water had been turned into the finest of wines. Indeed, as the steward said, it was the custom of hosts to serve the best wine first, and the cheaper wine later when the people would be less likely to notice the difference. But in a radical turn of social customs, Jesus reverses the wine.

Now that we've heard the story, what does it all mean?

I suspect that Jesus had not planned on performing any miracles that day, much less at a wedding. Fortunately, he was able to accomplish this sign in relative privacy as the only people who knew of this were Mary, the disciples and the servants who filled the jars. This way he saved the hosts and bridegroom from a social disaster. But that was not the chief intent of Jesus' first "sign". As mentioned earlier, signs do not exist for the

purpose of pointing to themselves, but rather to something else that is more important. Not many would stop the car to take a picture of a sign saying *GRAND CANYON AHEAD*.

First, there is the sign of the wine. In the Old Testament is considered not only one of God's good gifts, it is a sign of the coming of the Messiah. The prophet Isaiah declared: On this mountain the lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever; Then the lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

It was a sign that Messiah was in their presence, and not only Messiah, but one far greater. If Jesus could turn water into wine, then he was, In fact, the maker of wine, the creator of water, wine, and grapes. Jesus was God in the flesh, and this was the first "sign".

C.S. Lewis has written that what Jesus was doing on a small scale was what God does every day. In his essay entitled: *miracles*, he writes: "God creates the vine and teaches it to draw up water by its roots and with the aid of the sun, to turn that water into a Juice which will ferment and take on certain qualities. Thus, from every year, from Noah's time till ours, God turns water into wine." He goes on to say: "The miracle has only half its effect if it only convinces us that Christ is God: It will have its full effect if whenever we see a vineyard or drink a glass of wine, we remember that here works He who sat at the wedding party in Cana."

miracles summon us to see the hand of God in every aspect of life. Furthermore, the previously near empty ritual cleansing pots were a reminder that Judaism as it had been known and practiced was empty. While purification could cleanse one's hands and feet, it could not cleanse one's heart.

The wine Jesus made was the wine of the New Covenant. Have you wondered why Jesus made so much wine? It has been estimated that he made nearly 180 gallons of wine and that would equate to about 1,000 bottles. I think this further reveals that Jesus is extravagantly generous and desires to give us good gifts.

The fact that this sign occurred at a wedding, however, was not merely coincidental. Weddings for him were often a metaphor for the coming fullness of the Kingdom of God, which would begin with an extravagant wedding feast. Several of his parables were about wedding banquets and how everyone was invited, but not everyone would accept the invitation. Jesus even described himself as the groom at such a wedding and the Church as his bride.

This miracle story, or as John calls it, the first of seven signs, is not about displaying his power and ability to work wonders. It is about Jesus revealing himself first to those who were closest to him, his mother and his disciples.

John concludes this story, writing: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him." Glory is a crucially important word in Scripture, and one that is not easily defined. Author and theologian, John Piper, says it well when he writes: "The glory of God is the infinite beauty and greatness of God's manifold perfections." Glory is the essence of who God is, of who Jesus is.

Mary, his disciples and some servants had the opportunity to glimpse something of the glory of God at a wedding long ago in Cana of Galilee. This miracle story, the first of seven signs is about Jesus and who he is. He is the one who will one day host the cosmic supper of the Lamb as he calls it. It's about the invitation you and I have been given to celebrate not only a wedding and a feast, but life forever in his kingdom. When we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper next time, let us remember that the fruit of the grape we will drink did not come about because of vineyards or because of Welch's, it came about because of the goodness and power of God.

That being the case, this sign from John's Gospel reminds us that without warning, God often breaks into the ordinary events of life, transforming them into moments of insight into His glory and our place in his purposes. In these moments he gives us the opportunity to believe - May we be open to the signs of the kingdom so that in surprising us with his joy, God may claim us as his own. Friends, if you remember nothing at all from this sermon, remember this one thing- THE BEST IS YET TO COME.

AMEN AND AMEN