

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
Dr. Jay Howell
October 11, 2020

“Signs and Wonders: When the Wine Gives Out”
John 2:1-11

Today we start a new series we’re calling “Signs and Wonders,” a seven-week look at the so-called “signs” of Jesus in the Gospel of John, beginning this week with his first: a wedding reception. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours.
Amen.

The last verse we read a moment ago, v. 11, says, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” Just in that one verse, John lifts up a confusing question—or at least it’s confusing to me. How on earth does what Jesus did reveal his glory? Kind of strange question to ask, but it’s been bugging me.

What Jesus did, this story of a wedding reception at which the wine runs out and Jesus turns water into wine to keep the party going—some of you may have heard this story before—what Jesus did was the first of his so-called signs. Not just a mighty act, not just a miracle, but a sign. What do signs do?

A lot of meaning in the word “sign.” You can have stop signs, you can have neon signs, you can sign a document, you can communicate in sign language. Big range of meaning, and all of those examples kind of get at what John means by the word. Probably a better way to really understand what John is getting at is to consult that oracle of pop music Britney Spears, who once so eloquently sang, “My loneliness is killing me. And I, I must confess, I still believe. When I’m not with you I lose my mind. Give me a sign. Hit me baby one more time.”

“Give me a sign,” she said. You know what she meant. She wanted some indication, some demonstration of what her love interest thought and intended and would do. That’s closer to what John means as a “sign” for Jesus, something that he would do that reveals something about him, something about who he is, about his intentions, about his nature.

Obviously, the clearest kind of sign Jesus could have given, if you ask me, would be for him to stand on a mountaintop or at the gates of Jerusalem and like William Wallace in Braveheart was rumored to do, consume his enemies with fireballs from his eyes and bolts of lightning from another place. In other words, demonstrate that he’s in power, he’s in charge. That’s what that kind of sign would show. But he doesn’t do that.

Instead, for his first sign, this is what he does: he saves a wedding party from becoming a real drag. That’s it. Seems to be kind of waste of a first shot if you ask me. But then we come to that last verse that we read, where John tells us that this act, this sign, “revealed his glory.” And that’s what puzzles me. What glory is there in saving a wedding? I get that it’s a nice thing to do, but we’re talking glory here. What’s Jesus showing us about himself?

The wedding he was at seems to be that of a relative or at least a family friend, just because his mother was also there and because it seems his mother played some role in organizing it. But this isn’t just some one-night party. Weddings then operated a bit differently.

In your typical wedding these days, it's months and months of planning that go into one huge night. The festivities might be more than just one night, but if so, they usually extend before the wedding. On the day of the wedding, there's the ceremony, and the reception. After the reception, that's it.

And what does the couple do after the reception? Not like right after. We don't need to answer that question. I mean the day after. Oftentimes, when we're not in a pandemic, the couple would go on a trip, a honeymoon. Point is, the day after the wedding, the couple leaves town. They're gone.

Not so then. Here's a glimpse of what this wedding might've looked like. There's a wedding ceremony, and then after that the couple might've been paraded through the town, winding through the streets, making their way to the home where they would start their life together. Once there, the couple would then start what could be best described as an open house party, during which folks were invited to come and go and come and go over the course of not hours or a single evening, but days. Can you imagine that? For a number of days after a wedding, you and your spouse just hang out and people unannounced come in and out of your home for days. The couple practically hold court, and people come to see them and join the celebration.

So, it meant that for such a celebration, the supplies had to last. There had to be enough food, and more to the point, there had to be enough wine. It meant that someone somewhere, maybe a parent, maybe the couple themselves, planned out the amount of wine for the celebration.

But then, at some point over the course of this days-long celebration, the wine gives out. That effectively means, the celebration is over, and for this family, for this couple, that is cause for serious public humiliation during what should be the most cherished celebration. It's like that video of a wedding being held out on a small dock, surrounded by a pristine lake and trees and sunshine, but then the dock collapses and the whole wedding party falls into the water. Something that should have been a cherished, perfect memory becomes a point of embarrassment. That's what has happened when the wine gives out.

And what do they do? Jesus's mother turns to Jesus, and in an amusing exchange that we don't have time to unpack fully today, gets him to reluctantly help.

Jesus directs the attendants to fill up these large stone jars, these jars that held water for rites of purification. He tells them to fill them up to the brim with water.

Now I don't want to project or assume too much about these water jars or about this family or this couple at whose home these jars were sitting, but when I hear ceremonial jars for washing one's hands, I'm willing to bet that these jars might not have been noticed all that much. Not to say they were ignored, but used so regularly that you stop paying attention to them. By that I mean something like what my grandfather used to do when he would bless the food. He would offer a blessing before every meal, but each blessing tended to be, "Lord thank you for the food, Amen!" Done so often that it became more rote ceremony than a cognizant expression of faith. I'm imagining these jars in the same way, used so regularly that they're barely even noticed, gathering dust on the side of the room, to the point that when Jesus points them out, the attendants think, "What, those old things?"

And yet, those stone jars are the vessels by which Jesus brings about the first of his signs, these acts that reveal, that point to his glory.

They fill them with water. The water turns to wine. The wedding celebration is saved, and even the chief steward is astounded because this new wine was better than anything that had come before it. All out of these dusty stone jars. It's an unusual choice for a sign.

Roughly half of the Gospel of John, in the opinion of many pastors and theologians and scholars over the years, is structured around this series of signs from Jesus during his ministry. One big reason why I think this journey in John's Gospel is so timely—and I say timely not to give us pastors a pat on the back; we had this planned a year ago and obviously had no idea then what the circumstances would be now. Actually, another side note. I found out not long ago that another church in the area recently did a very similar series in John also called “Signs and Wonders,” so just in case you might think we're just copying someone else, I'd add again that we planned this out a year ago, but I'll still probably go watch those sermons and just, you know, take stuff from them.

Point is, we had no idea what this year would look like, but I believe the Spirit was at work, because I think this account of signs from the Lord is so timely. And the big reason for that, I think, is in fact the reason John gives us for why he's writing all of this down in the first place. He tells us that reason toward the very end of his Gospel, all the way at the end of the twentieth chapter. After Jesus has risen from the dead and is meeting with his disciples again, John offers an almost parenthetical note in the middle of the wrap-up to his Gospel, seems kind of out of place, out of order, but he tells us, in v. 30 of John chapter 20, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” These signs were given and were written down, John says, so that you may believe and have life in his name.

Friends I believe this is a timely Word to us, because I believe that there are many of us about at the end of our rope and are feeling something like, “God, I don't normally think like this, but I'm having a really hard time, and I could really use some sign, something to show me that you're still there, that you're still with me, that you're still at work. Can you show me something?” I think there are a lot of us in that boat right now.

Though you may not have been preparing for a weeklong wedding celebration, you may have been pacing yourself, rationing your endurance to help you get through the next season, but the most disheartening thing is that you have no idea how much longer you'll have to hang in there. It might have been when this whole pandemic really started for us here back in March when the lockdown first hit. You might have told yourself, okay, I can make it through the next couple of months like this, but then things will need to return to normal. And you mentally prepare for a couple of months. Then a couple of months come and go, and you find you need to hang in there for another few months, through the end of the summer, you tell yourself, you can make it that far. Then summer comes and goes, and you find you need to hang in there well into the Fall, and now you don't even know if that's going to be the end of it. And you find yourself going from one degree of exhaustion to the next because the finish line keeps moving.

Have you ever tried running a race? Doesn't matter how long it was. Point is for a race there's a defined finish line so you pace yourself to go that far and no more. But how would it feel if you were prepared to run a 5k, and you run it as hard as you can so that your energy gives out right at the end of it. But what if at the end of it, they told you, actually this is a marathon, and you've got another 23 miles to go. That's a completely different feeling than if you had known you were running a marathon right from the start. If they keep moving the finish line, at some point your legs give out. Put another way, at some point the wine gives out.

That's where this couple was. Resources and energy exhausted, but quite a lot left to go. That's what Jesus speaks into. That's where Jesus reveals his glory. That's where Jesus says, “I will bring relief.” And how does he do it? What does use? Where does relief come from?

From those dusty old religious things over on the side of the house. And it was better than it had been before.

Friends, what are the dusty stone jars in your life right now? What are the things, maybe it's not even a thing, maybe it's a habit or a mindset, maybe it's something religious maybe it's not, but something that you've either put off to the side or something so normal that you just stopped noticing? What are the dusty stone jars in your life? If you, like the couple at this wedding, find your stores running low and yourself running on empty, maybe give those dusty jars another look. Because if Jesus has shown us something by his very first sign, it's that he uses the ordinary, seemingly overlooked things to bring relief, and not just relief, but to bring about something new and something better, that you might believe and have life in his name.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**