

“The First of His Signs” (a.k.a. “Water, Wine, and a Whip”)

(The Gospel of John, Part 7)

John 2

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January 15, 2017

Remember these words from John 1: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” (John 1.14) Jesus is full of *grace*, and he is also full of *truth*. Here in John 2, we see examples of how *both* statements are true.

It’s time for a wedding! The setting is Cana, a small village in Galilee, roughly eight or nine miles from Nazareth, where Jesus had grown up. Some young couple is getting married. Whoever they were, they were people who *knew* Jesus, and his mother Mary, and his small band of disciples. It’s not even been a week since Jesus was baptized, so Jesus and his mother must have had a relationship with this young couple *before* Jesus began his ministry. Mary must have known the family well; she appears to be working in the kitchen. Maybe it was a good family friend, or a cousin. Jesus did not just arrive on the scene, fully grown, as an adult. He had grown up, in Nazareth, as a member of a family, a member of a village community. He knew people. He had *friends*. One of those friends invited him to their wedding.

There’s no mention of Joseph, the husband of Mary, the man who had raised Jesus. He doesn’t show up here or in any other story from when Jesus was an adult. Commentators speculate that Joseph had died before Jesus’ baptism. That would account for his conspicuous absence here and elsewhere.

The wedding guests are having a grand time – until there’s a crisis in the kitchen. They run out of wine! Mary reports the situation to Jesus. Jesus makes an interesting reply, and there are numerous different translations and widely differing interpretations. In some versions (like the NRSV) it feels like Jesus rebukes his mother: “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” The King James is even more blunt: “Woman, what have I to do with thee?” But careful commentators note that the word used here for “Woman” is the same word Jesus uses tenderly from the cross: “Woman, here is your son.” (John 19.26) Barclay suggests “Lady” would be a better translation. Brunner says, “Jesus’ words could mean, simply, ‘I am not clear, Mother, why you are telling me this.’” Maybe it wasn’t a rebuke at all. The *next* sentence matters more: “My hour has not yet come.” Jesus will refer to his “hour” periodically through John’s gospel. He knows that something momentous will happen in his life, and as the gospel unfolds it becomes clear he’s talking about his cross and our redemption. Jesus is about to do something *amazing* here in Cana, but it is *miniscule* in comparison to what he will do at Calvary.

Mary says to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” There’s a nuance that shows up in the original Greek that is lost in English translation. Frequently in the gospels, the narrator starts out in the past tense and then shifts into the present, in an effort to make the story more vivid, more real, as if it’s happening *right now*. This happens here in this passage; John had been speaking in the past tense when the chapter opened, but in the middle of verse 3 he shifts to the present tense. That means that verse 5 literally reads: “His mother says to the servants, ‘Whatever he tells you to do, *do it.*’” That instruction from Jesus’ mother is not just something she said to a bunch of servants back then, it’s something she says to servants *now*, in the present, whenever anybody reads the gospel. To all those of us who claim to *serve* Jesus Christ, the implications are huge: “Whatever he tells you to do, *do it.*” What does it mean to be a Christian? *To worship and serve Jesus.* What does it mean to serve Jesus? *To do whatever he tells us to do.* Those words are as relevant for us *now* as they were for the wedding servants back then.

Jesus tells the wedding servants to fill six stone jugs with water. These were for purification rites prescribed in the law of Moses, but someone greater than Moses is here. The servants do as Jesus bids – and amazing things happen. The lesson is clear: *wonderful* things happen when people willingly choose to follow God’s will! The steward tastes the water and discovers that it has become wine – not just some cheap wine, but *really good stuff*, better than what he had been serving the wedding guests. “You have kept the good wine until now,” the steward says to the groom. Yes, that is what God has done; God has kept the best wine till now. What God is doing through Jesus is offering the world something richer, better, juicier, more flavorful, more life-giving, than *anything* that had come before.

It’s the first miracle in the gospel. It’s important to note what *kind* of a miracle this was. This wasn’t a healing; it was a *wedding*. A celebration, a *party!* *Joyful festivity!* *Water* turned into *wine!* There are versions of Christianity that promote an austere asceticism, that suggest we should refrain from having fun and that we should *especially* refrain from any form of drinking. Good grief, do you see what Jesus has just done? He made *wine!* *Good wine!* Not just for show – but for *drinking!* He wanted the wedding guests to *enjoy themselves!* Don’t go overboard with that – there are plenty of other passages in the scriptures that make it clear that drinking is okay but drunkenness is not – but note what this means: *Jesus wants us to enjoy life!* Don’t ever think that Jesus doesn’t want you to have any fun. That’s not what the gospel is about. *He came that we may have life,* John will tell us later on, *life to the full* – and we’re not just talking about pie in the sky when you die. No, he means life, *now!* *Celebration!*

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” (John 2.11) It’s not just the *miracle* that’s important. No, it’s a *sign*, something that points beyond itself, something that points to *who and what Jesus is*. He “revealed his glory.” He helped people see who he truly is. The grace of God is being made manifest. Jesus’ identity is being revealed. Beholding that glory, “his disciples believed in him.” That is, they *trusted* in him. They had already come to understand some aspects of his identity back in chapter 1; now, they see even *more*. The more time they spend in Jesus’ presence, the more they behold, the more their hearts are inclined to trust in him, the better their lives will become. Ditto for us. The more we see *who Jesus truly is*, the more we are inspired to place our full, wholehearted trust in him, the better our lives become.

The action shifts to the great city of Jerusalem. Jesus goes to Jerusalem several different times

in John's gospel for significant festivals. Chief among them is the Passover, remembering God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, which is celebrated three different times in John's gospel, indicating that the amount of time that passes between Jesus's baptism and crucifixion is greater than two full years. The way John tells the story, when Jesus to Jerusalem not long after his baptism is when he cleansed the temple. People would go to Jerusalem to offer animal sacrifices, following the instructions in the Law of Moses, and those instructions specified that the animals offered had to be "without blemish." So there were people selling animals in the temple that met the necessary specifications. There were also people in the temple changing various forms of currency so that the worshiping Jews could make offerings with coins that didn't have idolatrous images on them. There were two problems with all of this: first, these transactions should have been taking place *outside* the temple grounds, rather than causing commotion and disturbance in this house of prayer; secondly, the vendors and the money-changers were charging exorbitant fees, fleecing the poor in an effort to get rich. Their *greed* was more important to them than their *God*. Charging enough to make a decent living is one thing; overcharging so that you can get rich at other people's expense is another matter entirely. Jesus puts up with none of it. He gets angry. He gets violent. There is a time and a place for righteous anger. There are sins that are not excusable and that God will not tolerate. Jesus makes quite a scene, throwing over tables and driving out the scoundrels out with a whip! The Jewish leaders confront him; they demand "a sign," something that might justify his actions. His reply is enigmatic: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jewish leaders misunderstand; they think he is talking about the temple where they are standing, in Jerusalem, that "second temple" built some 550 years earlier and which, for the previous 46 years, had been undergoing a massive renovation and expansion under the direction of Herod the Great. But Jesus is talking about the temple of his *body*, which in the grand scheme of things is far more significant than any building. Jesus cared about worship in that temple, but he was also saying that his death and resurrection are more important than even that.

Twin stories, one in a tiny little village in Galilee, the other in the greatest city in all Israel. In the former, Jesus offered *grace*; in the latter, Jesus offered *truth*. Christ's grace leads to joy and mirth and merriment; Christ's truth leads to confrontation and judgment and justice. His grace and his truth pour out in equal measure, depending on the situation. Real encounters with Jesus leave people *changed*. When you receiving his grace, your life becomes richer, more joyful, more abundant; when you receive his truth, you might find yourself facing his whip and his wrath. The things we do matter to God, and if what you're doing dishonors God or hurts other people, consider yourself warned: Jesus can get angry – and he doesn't hold back. But he also loves a good party, celebrating the joys of human life, the sacred institution of marriage. This is the same person we're talking about here, who both *loves life* and *hates hypocrisy* – or, I should say, the same *God*. Grace and truth are flip sides of the same coin.

People have some decisions to make. *We* have some decisions to make. Who *is* Jesus? Is he truly who he says he is? A few people were convinced back in chapter 1. More are convinced here in chapter 2. "Many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing." Jesus will perform a number of very specific signs as the gospel unfolds – seven of them, to be precise – and those who behold these signs have to decide: *Is* he who he says he is? *Are* we going to place our trust in him?

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