

## “The First of His Signs”

John 2:1-11

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Mason, Michigan

January 16, 2022

Second Sunday after Epiphany

This is a church in the town of Kafr Kanna, in the northern part of Israel, about four miles northeast of Nazareth, and about ten miles west of the Sea of Galilee. Kafr Kanna is an Arab town, with a population of some 22,000 Muslims and Christians, who live together in peace. This church was built in 1881, on the site of an ancient Jewish synagogue. The church attracts Christian pilgrims from all over the world; Katharine and I have been there. The site is famous because, according to an ancient Christian tradition, it is where a wedding took place that is recorded in the New Testament. Indeed, the church is commonly known as “the Wedding Church.” The irony is that we have no idea whose wedding it was! The names of the bride and groom are completely lost to history. The wedding was important not because of who was getting married – but because of what one of the guests while he was there.

Here is what the interior of the Wedding Church looks like. It is a lovely little chapel. Countless couples have renewed their wedding vows here. This is a close-up of the chancel area. On the far left stands an image of Jesus; on the far right stands an image of his mother Mary. In the center, high up, there is a painting depicting the event that is recorded in the New Testament. And underneath the painting are some large stone jars that could be used for holding water. Count them ... there are six.

“On the third day,” we read in the Gospel according to John, “there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee.” It has been three days since Jesus called Philip and Nathanael to follow him as his disciples. It is early in Jesus’s ministry – *very* early. Indeed, his ministry has barely begun. “There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples were also there.” There is a very old legend that Mary was a relative of one of the people getting married; one version of that legend says that Mary was the aunt of the groom. That is speculative, but it would explain why Mary is present for this wedding in Cana, which was not her hometown. Another theory is that Nathanael was a friend of the groom, for we are told later on in John’s gospel that Nathanael was from Cana. Whatever the connections may have been, Jesus, some of his followers, and his mother all attend this wedding.

Weddings in biblical times were grand affairs. We know from the book of Judges and the book of Tobit that, at least in some cases, wedding festivities lasted seven days. A whole *week*! That would require a generous supply of wine. Galilee is a very fertile region; grapes grow in abundance; ordinarily there would be plenty of wine. But, on this occasion, there wasn’t enough. Maybe the guests were drinking more than normal; maybe there were more guests than the groom and his family had planned for; maybe there just wasn’t enough wine on hand in the first place. Mary notices that they have run out. She says to Jesus, “They have no wine.” She doesn’t ask him to *do* anything about that; it appears

to have just been a simple statement of fact. “They have no wine.” At this point in the Gospel story Jesus has performed no miracles, and there would have been no expectation on anybody’s part that Jesus *would* perform any miracles like that. There were no prophecies anywhere in the Old Testament saying that the Messiah would perform miracles on behalf of individual people. So it seems that Mary was neither asking nor expecting Jesus to do anything about this problem.

Jesus says to his mother: “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour is not yet come.” Jesus’s question to Mary is somewhat cryptic. Literally, he asks: “Woman, what to you and to me?” It is an idiomatic phrase, showing up a number of times in the Bible, that is hard to translate into English. In this context it simply seems to mean something like this: “That is your business. It’s not my business. Why are you asking me to get involved?” Some people think that Jesus addressing his mother as “Woman” implies some kind of rebuke, as if Mary has done something wrong and Jesus is chastising her, but that is probably an over-interpretation. Jesus often addresses woman in this manner; the word “woman” in those cases seems to mean something like “Ma’am,” and is a term of respect. So Jesus’s words to Mary probably meant something like this: “Ma’am, I understand that’s important to you, but what do I have to do with it?” It was a friendly question. Don’t read too much into it.

But what Jesus says next is much more significant: “My hour has not yet come.” He says this as if to explain *why* he doesn’t feel a need to get involved. His “hour” has not yet come. Many words in the Gospel of John are loaded with meaning, and “hour” is one of them. Several times in the early part of the Gospel, Jesus refers to an “hour” that is coming, and John the Gospel-writer says several times that Jesus’s “hour had not yet come.” But this changes, after Jesus arrives in Jerusalem near the end of his ministry; Jesus declares, “the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (John 12:23). John adds, “Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father.” (John 13:1) At the Last Supper, Jesus prays, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.” (John 17:1) The “hour” that Jesus is referring to is the time of his passion, death, and resurrection. So when he says to Mary, “My hour has not yet come,” he is thinking about the climax of his earthly ministry. Here we are, practically at the very beginning. Jesus’s hour has not yet come.

Nevertheless ... Jesus *is* going to do something about the shortage of wine. His mother seems to understand this. In that fleeting moment, Mary realizes Jesus is about to act, *despite* the fact that she hadn’t actually asked him to, *despite* the fact that his hour has not yet come. She does not know *what* he is going to do, or *how* he is going to solve this problem, but she knows that he *will*. This is her son, in whom the Holy Spirit now dwells, the Holy Spirit that descended upon him from heaven at his baptism. He has *power* that the world has not yet seen. Here, in Cana, he is about to reveal some of that power for the very first time. Mary senses this. She says to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

“Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification.” They would have looked something like these ancient jars that are on display in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. These were large jars; each could hold approximately 20 to 30 gallons of water. These were used, as John says, for Jewish purification rituals. They weren’t there for the wedding! Jesus instructs the servants to fill them with water. Then he said, “Now draw some out, and take it to the person in charge of the banquet.” So the servants dip a cup into one of the jars, and take the cup to the person in charge. He tastes it ... and it is not water any more. Those stone jars are now holding about 120 gallons of *wine*.

This was Jesus’ first public miracle. Now you understand why there are six stone jars prominently on display in the church built on the site of this wedding. They represent that first miracle.

The man in charge of the banquet is amazed. He doesn't realize that a miracle has happened; he just thinks that the groom decided to keep some wine in reserve. But this wine tastes especially good; it is dramatically more flavorful than what the wedding guests have been drinking up till now. "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk," he says; "but you have kept the good wine until now." He doesn't know it, but he is speaking a deep theological truth. For Jesus himself will be the "cup of salvation;" his blood will be shed to give new life to all of us; that blood is represented today by grape juice or wine. Jesus himself is, in a metaphorical sense, the "good wine" that has been kept in reserve until now. Before him have come Moses and Elijah and Isaiah and many other prophets, who all pointed people towards God. They were all good, "tasty" in their own way, if you will; but Jesus surpasses them all. *God* has kept the *good* wine until now.

So *Jesus attended a wedding*. Not just the wedding, but the party too. There was a lot of wine – and Jesus made a whole lot more! So this story shows that Jesus honored the institution of marriage, even if he himself never got married. It also shows that Jesus had absolutely no issues with people drinking wine. I mean, why would he make 120 gallons of wine, if he didn't expect it to be *used*? There are some Christian traditions that tell church members to refrain from all alcohol use – but there's really no biblical justification for that. Jesus himself drank wine – there are some specific references to that in the Gospels – and Jesus had no objection to anyone else drinking as well. The New Testament repeatedly tells us to avoid *drunkenness* – but there is nothing wrong with drinking in moderation.

The point of the story, though, isn't about the wedding, and it isn't about the wine. The point of the story is about *Jesus himself*. This was "the first of his *signs*." "Sign" is another word with deep significance; in the Gospel of John, there are seven specific *signs* that Jesus performs as his ministry unfolds: changing water into wine (2:1-11); curing a nobleman's son (4:46-54); healing a paralytic (5:1-15); feeding the five thousand (6:1-14); walking on water (6:15-21); opening the eyes of a blind man (9:1-41); and raising Lazarus from the dead (11:38-44). These are miracles that Jesus performs that all point *beyond* themselves to a deeper truth: the truth about *Jesus himself*. "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and *revealed his glory*." Jesus revealed that he is not just an ordinary human. There is something uniquely *special* about Jesus, something *majestic*, something *grand*, something *glorious*. *Jesus has a glory that is uniquely his*, as the only-begotten Son of Almighty God.

And what does the revelation of that glory *do*? It makes people *believe* in him. Jesus "revealed his glory; and his disciples *believed* in him." When they beheld what Jesus could do, when they perceived that there was a *power* working in him that came from none other than Almighty *God*, it motivated and inspired people to *believe* in Jesus, to place their *trust* in him. It made people willing to leave behind their former way of life, and follow where Jesus would lead. It inspired people to bring their loved ones to Jesus for healing. It motivated people to listen to his teachings, his words of truth. It caused people to reflect on their own life, their own priorities, and make some needed changes. It brought them *hope* that there was more to this world than what we can see and hear and touch and taste and smell. There is a *Messiah!* There is a *Savior!* There is a *Lord!* And he's *right here!*

So the invitation to believe in him is for *us* as well. We weren't at that wedding; we didn't see that sign. But, as John says at the end of his Gospel, "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." (John 20:31) And "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (John 20:29)

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