

C Ordinary 2  
2013 January 20  
John 2.1-11  
"The First of His Signs"

A priest is driving along the highway and is stopped by an observant state trooper who sees the priest weaving more than he should. The trooper smells alcohol on the priest's breath and then sees an empty wine bottle on the floor of the car. He says, "Sir, have you been drinking?" "Just water, my son, as God is my witness" says the priest. The trooper says, "Then why do I smell wine?" "The priest looks at the bottle and says, "Holy Mary, Joseph and Jesus! He's done it again!"

We have another very familiar story from the gospels. The story of Jesus changing water into wine appears only in John's gospel. We are told at the end of the passage that it is the first of his signs. In Greek the word used is *semeion*, commonly translated as signs, to designate the miracles that Jesus performs in John's gospel. In fact, there are exactly seven signs in John's gospel: no more, no less. You are probably well aware that throughout the Bible, both in the Hebrew and the Greek scriptures, seven is a number which appears time and again signifying wholeness, completeness, holiness, and purity.

Seven signs in the gospel of John. It is worth the time to summarize them in order to recall the arc off John's narrative:

1. Jesus changes water into wine at a marriage in the village of Cana.
2. Jesus heals the son of a royal official in the same village, even though he is miles away from the child. The son is apparently near to death before he is made well.
3. Jesus heals a man who is paralyzed in the town of Bethsaida.
4. Jesus feeds 5,000 people with a few loaves of bread and a few fish, which are miraculously multiplied to feed the crowd.
5. Jesus walks on the surface of the Sea of Galilee.
6. Jesus heals a blind man in Jerusalem.
7. Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from death in the village of Bethany.

The other gospels describe many more miracles, even the Gospel of Mark, which is much shorter than John's. But for John, seven signs is enough, enough to demonstrate for the disciples and the crowds, and even to us readers, that this Jesus really is the Son of God as he is described in the Prologue to the gospel, the first chapter. And not only there, but throughout the gospel. Jesus says that he comes from the Father and will return to the Father. He says, if we see him, we see the Father.

The first sign is rather tame compared to the other six. So some water gets changed into wine. What's the big deal? That's not much compared to raising somebody from the dead, for example.

Nevertheless, if we stop and study the passage carefully, we learn a few things about Jesus, and that's what John is up to. He wants us to come to know Jesus as the divine Son, and to pledge our lives to him. The first sign is one of many carefully chosen and narrated steps toward that purpose.

Today most weddings and the following celebration are over in a few hours. It was not so in Jesus' time. The celebration would typically go on for days, even as long as seven days. Normally the wedding celebration occurred at the home of the groom's parents, and they would

spend weeks getting ready for the big party. They would lay aside a large quantity of wine and meat and delicacies for their friends and the friends of the bride and groom. Peasants in Jesus' day did not drink wine daily. It was much too expensive. Wine was served at celebrations, and especially at weddings. You can imagine that putting on a wedding feast was a major expense for the groom's parents.

We are told that Jesus and his disciples and his mother have all been invited to this wedding. By the way, the name of Jesus' mother is never used anywhere in John's gospel. She is always "the mother of Jesus." Anyway, at some point in the several-day celebration, the wine runs out. For some reason about which we can only conjecture, Jesus' mother comes to him and says, "They have no wine." Perhaps she is very close to the groom's family and doesn't want to see them embarrassed or disgraced.

Jesus answers in a most puzzling way: "Woman, what is that to me or to you? My hour has not yet come." His response comes across as rude and insensitive, but Greek scholars tell us that his response loses some of its bite when considered in the context of its time. For example, it would not have been uncommon for a son to address his mother as "woman" at least on occasion.

The word "hour," "hora" in the Greek, appears 20 times in John's gospel, and always carries a connotation of a divinely appointed hour, a particular time of great significance. In many of those instances the word "hour" means the hour of Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, torture, and execution. But at other places the term seems to mean something else. For example, here in verse 2, it seems to indicate the hour on which Jesus will begin his teaching, signs, and ministry.

Jesus says, "My hour has not yet come." And look what Jesus' mother does in response. She turns and speaks to the servants standing nearby, "Do whatever he tells you." Now that's an odd thing to say as well. Perhaps Jesus' mother knows that he will do something even though he appears reluctant. He is on his Father's schedule, not his mother's. But somehow she suspects he will do something.

And sure enough, he does. Why is that? Throughout John's gospel Jesus emphasizes his deep connection to his Father, indeed saying at one point that "the Father and I are one." Why does he do something about the depleted wine when apparently it is not yet time for him to be revealed? Perhaps this is another instance in which an appeal to God (in this case, God's Son) actually produces a change of mind. Recall Abraham bargaining with the LORD over the fate of Sodom, and Moses pleading successfully for the lives of his people.

There are standing there six stone water jars, each holding two or three metretas in the Greek. In terms of gallons that comes to be twenty or thirty. These jars were used to hold water for the rather recently adopted Jewish purification rituals. Jesus tells the servants to fill them to the top with water, draw some of the liquid out, which has now become wine, and take the sample to the chief steward.

The chief steward tastes the wine and pronounces it finer than the wine that was served at the beginning of the celebration. The chief steward cannot know where the wine came from, but Jesus' disciples and the servants know. At the end of the passage we are told that by this, his first sign, he revealed his glory and his disciples came to believe in him.

Wine appears everywhere in both the Hebrew and the Greek scriptures. And very often it is associated with celebration, abundance, and joy. Amos 9:13:

The time is surely coming, says the Lord,  
when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps,  
and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed;  
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,  
and all the hills shall flow with it.

And here is Joel 3:18:

On that day  
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,  
the hills shall flow with milk,  
and all the stream beds of Judah  
shall flow with water.

And Isaiah 25:6

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.

It is surely true that the prophets condemn the drinking of wine when it leads to drunkenness and debauchery, and when it is pursued at the expense of the poor. Drunkenness is condemned in the same way in some of the New Testament letters. But there is nevertheless this theme of celebration with wine which runs throughout the scriptures.

Many scholars believe that the six stone water jars represent the old ritual system of Judaism, with the Torah, the Jewish Law, at its center. Somewhere along the way new rituals became prescribed for the Jews, which involved cleansing with water.

Jesus comes and fills those jars with wine. The wine that is so often associated with celebration, abundance, and joy in the Hebrew Scriptures. We see here another hint that what Jesus brings is not an end to the old rituals, but new life for those rituals. Jesus comes bringing abundance and joy, changing rigid, ingrown, dead practices into new ones, filled with life. That's what Jesus brings, and John works to make that point in this, Jesus' first sign in John's gospel.

Jesus will say a little later in the gospel, I am the Way, the Truth, and Life. That is, in me is true life. A little later in John's gospel, Jesus identifies himself as the source of living water, water that can never run dry, a spring that can never stop flowing. And still later in this gospel Jesus says "I am the Bread of Life." Not just bread that is consumed and gone, but the bread that gives life abundant, rich, full, joyous, and complete.

In fact, John's gospel is filled with Jesus saying things and doing things that demonstrate that he has come to bring life, full and rich and plentiful. And this first sign, in which water is turned into wine, is just one example.

The first sign. Jesus says to his disciples and to others who would stop and listen, and to us: Look! I offer you something no other person or activity or enterprise can give you: Life. True life. Life in me. Life filled with fullness and joy. Set aside old ways, dead ways, unfulfilling, tiresome, hopeless ways. Look! I offer you real life, true life.

The one who changed ordinary water into rich wine can change us too, not only individually, but us as a church that ministers in his name and that worships him. In fact, the only hope we have, as individuals and as a church, is in this Jesus.

To this day, he is still performing signs, still changing water into wine.