

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. 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." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

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Turning water into wine. It is an amazing skill, to be sure, and yet it seems an odd way to start revealing your glory in a way that inspires trust in your followers. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus launches his ministry by healing diseases and driving out demons. Those miracles drew quite a bit of attention.

In this story that only shows up in John's Gospel, Jesus chooses to interfere at a wedding to turn loose his unusual abilities for the first time. Some scholars take this to mean that Mary and Jesus were relatives of the bride or the groom. For a non-relative to step in, even helpfully, would have been shameful. Even so, why make an entrance only for your cousins, aunts and uncles? And if the banquet was already three days along, as incredible as making wine appear *is*, was it necessary or really even useful?

This is the first of Jesus' seven signs in John's Gospel, where they are never called "miracles." That's because, for John, the act itself is not the point. The signs in John point to something else – something still more astonishing.

John wants to *show* us without *telling* us the deeper reality that Jesus reveals. Just like bird hunters know that if they point their finger for a *wild* dog, the dog will just look at their finger. But a good hunting dog will look at where the hunter is pointing. Revelation for the sake of revelation is truly compelling, and yet John hopes we will look beyond the wedding event to see the glory that the disciples saw.

A little background information helps us to avoid staring at this sign like wolves looking at a hunter's finger and begin to turn our heads to the Anointed One that the sign is pointing toward.

First, it helps to remember that Jesus and his mum were faithful Jews. In fact, there are persuasive reasons to assume that Jesus was raised as a

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Pharisee, the reform movement that evolved into rabbinic Judaism, the roots of all major branches of contemporary Judaism.

John has filled this story with Jewish references from Hebrew Scripture and from the teachings of the rabbis. Setting this sign in the context of a wedding recalls passages from Isaiah in which YHWH welcomes Israel back into relationship and reconciles with her.

In the ancient world, weddings involved the prearranged union of two families or, in many cases, a joining of different parts of an extended family. And so, this story takes place in the joy of a community uniting in a new way; a celebration of new life and possibility. The Sadducees might have preferred a religious setting. Instead, Jesus pointed us to God's grace like the Pharisees taught here in an everyday life-event.

John goes on to borrow an image from the Book of Esther, from a story about Esther as a guest at the seven customary days of a wedding feast for the Persian king and his wife. The rabbis taught that the guests were surprised to discover that the food and wine for the last days was as excellent as the first. This, for the rabbis, was the sign of a messianic banquet where abundance would have no end.

In John's story about the first act of Jesus' public ministry, Jesus' mother is there. In John's entire Gospel, she shows up here at the beginning of his ministry and only one other time – at the foot of the cross. She is never called by her name, Mary – only by the honored title of “the mother of Jesus.” Jesus continues the respectful practice by addressing her as “woman.”

When she draws attention to the wine shortage, Jesus responds with a Hebrew turn of a phrase that shows up in several Hebrew scriptures: “What is this to you and me?” Jesus is not being cranky or disrespectful. John is showing us that Jesus receives his assignments only from God and never from his own ambitions. What appears as indifference is more likely patience for the messianic hour on the cross yet to come. “My hour has not yet arrived.”

Mary, being a good Jewish mother, sees something outstanding in her boy. She does not respond to him and instead, despite having no idea what Jesus intends to do, turns to the staff: “Do whatever he tells you.” And this is exactly why so many Catholics pray to Mary. We know that if you can't get a guy to do what you want, you go to his mother.

In fact, the Gospel author has once again borrowed from the Book of Esther. In that story, “royal wine was served in abundance and the rule for drinking was ‘No restrictions!’” because the king had ordered every palace steward to comply with every guest's wishes. John appears to have borrowed the rabbis' treatment of Esther by putting the Persian king's command into the mouth of a Jewish peasant woman, the mother of Jesus.

Once John's Gospel establishes that the Word became Flesh and pitched its tent among us, the author brilliantly uses our incarnate bodies to *show* us what God's abundant grace looks like, what it sounds like and how it feels.

And in this passage, the Gospel shows us what God's grace tastes like. In abundance. Jesus notices six stone water jars, each of which could hold anywhere from 15 to 30 gallons. The *amount* they hold is impressive. And once again, that they were jars made of *stone* points to something further.

You see, the laws from Leviticus regulating purity said that if a clay jar used to store water becomes contaminated, it must be broken. Under the same laws, stone jars could not be made unclean and so they were preferred for ordinary purification practices like washing feet after traveling or washing hands before eating.

First century Jews would have caught the significance of a detail that 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians might easily miss. Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with water. Until then, the jars were not full and may have been totally empty. That's not a random detail. Jesus is not simply making water already being used in a Jewish ritual into something better – something "Christian." He has, however, purposefully chosen vessels of Jewish purification to hold the gift of his messianic wine.

And so maybe this sign is necessary after all. *That* it happened is important. *How* it happened is not. What it *means* and what it points to is most important.

Because, despite centuries of misinterpretation, the story of this sign has never presented a triumph of Christianity over Judaism. Instead, Jesus began his public ministry with a profound respect for the traditions and rituals he grew up with. And from *those roots*, like other reformers of the day, Jesus embraced and revealed the abundant grace of God making all things new.

And so, we are right to be astonished at the sign itself – Jesus turning water into close to a thousand bottles of wine is nothing short of stunning. What it points to is found in the notion that this wine genuinely impressed the master of festivities as the fine wine *that came on the third day*.

Instead of producing boxes of Carlo Rossi plonk, Jesus astonished the banquet master with a wine that tasted like God's grace. (I'm imagining a perfectly aged Côtes du Rhône!)

Cheap wines have one note, one flavor, and then they fade. The very best wines are balanced with light and dark. They taste like the ground where their roots run deep and one of the most delightful characteristics of a great wine is a lingering and lengthy aftertaste.

Fine wine is as different from inferior wine as resurrection life is from life as we know it now. That difference meets us at the Eucharistic table. The

same Word made flesh who was crucified and buried rose from that darkness on the third day, transformed forever; the Light of the world.

The story goes that an ancient Christian student asked St. Jerome, the famous early Christian biblical scholar, if the pouring of wine ended at the wedding feast in Cana. “No,” said Jerome, “it has never ended. It is still being poured daily at the altar so that we might drink it and, if we are willing, be miraculously transformed into its love for this world each and every day.”

*This* is the glory of God that Jesus partially revealed in Cana. The same abundance of glory that shows our human senses what grace upon grace tastes like, what it smells like. It is the resurrection grace that is more than we can possibly drink in and given as gift when we least expect it.

The season of Epiphany is an outstanding opportunity to practice the search for signs of the glory of God, first looking within and then coming back to look outside ourselves. God may be even now turning water into wine in you or in your life. God may already be filling some apparently ordinary situation with unforeseen extraordinary gifts of grace.

Epiphany is a season for setting aside our worries and concerns about some imagined future so that we might taste a cup of unexpected joy that is running over now. It’s a chance to relax our need for certainty so that we might be surprised by the presence of Christ showing up in unexpected ways in everyday life.

And when we encounter Christ, as the mother of Jesus *still* says to God’s servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

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