

The First Miracle, Our Joy

John 2:1-11.

Say you were God. Some might like the idea. And you said, I want to send a Savior to earth to save the world. So you send him on. Now you say, I want to start by giving him a miracle to perform that will convince people that he is here to heal the world of all wrongs and sins. What would you pick out to be his first big one? Heal a leper, make the king sane again? Open the eyes of a blind person in the middle of Grand Central Station?

What about changing water into wine in a wedding in the countryside? That's how John begins Jesus' ministry. "Hey, Jesus! There's a hospital over here in Gilead. Come help us!" Jesus says, "Maybe later. I'm on my way to a wedding feast!"

Russian novelist Dostoevsky exclaims in his greatest novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*:

Ah, that sweet miracle! ...He worked his first miracle to help men's gladness....He who loves humanity, loves their joy...!¹

I love, as you know, to use this text at weddings!

Jesus was not oblivious to our need for joy; there are always plenty of opportunities for sorrow. Maybe this miracle is right on time for our needs today.

I

As we look at the story again today, the first thing to notice is that John calls the miracles “signs”! And John’s gospel records seven of them, this one, the first. He wants us to see where the miracle is pointing. That’s what signs do — point. Someone said Biblical literalism is like climbing up a sign post rather than following its direction! In fact, a little on in his gospel John says of those people believing in him just because of the signs he did: “Jesus did not trust himself to them.” You’ve heard of ambulance chasers. Some Christians are “miracle chasers”. They like to be bowled over, but they miss the message in it, the calling of God in it.

What miracles point to is the glory of God being revealed in Jesus, a glory everywhere if we could see it. In a beautiful Christmas fantasy story, *The Christmas Mystery*, an angel is escorting a young girl, Elizabet. When they come to a field of wildflowers, Elizabet exclaims how beautiful they are. The angel nods and says,

They are part of the glory of heaven that has strayed down to earth.... You see, there's so much glory in heaven that it's very easy for it to spill over.

This first miracle in John is a sign of heaven's glory spilling over with Jesus' coming, a spilling over that began in that manger when Jesus was born.

II

Now the story. Jesus and his disciples showed up at a wedding feast in Cana. Mary's role in the story suggests that the family was closely attached to the wedding party involved. Now the crisis. To the host's great embarrassment, the wine ran out! Are our anxieties about things going well ever higher than at a wedding?

Some have suggested through the years that it was the arrival at the party of Jesus and his disciples that caused the problem. They downed all the wine before the party got started!

In Luke the religious leaders say to Jesus :

John's disciples [the Baptist] are much given to fasting and the practice of prayer, and so are the disciples of the Pharisees; but yours eat and drink!

(Luke 5:33)

Jesus replied, "While the bride groom is here why should the wedding guests fast?" Jesus knew our need for joy.

III

Jesus' mother, seeing the developing social calamity, came to Jesus and said, "They have no wine." Was she thinking, "Jesus, the invitation said "Plus one", not "Plus twelve!" Especially your twelve!

Jesus replies with seeming sharpness. Our Bible has no emojis to help us interpret. "Woman, what concern is that to me? My hour is not yet come." It seems half insult, half non-sequitur.

Your mother comes in and asks you to help her. You say, "Sallie's in her room. Why don't you ever ask her to do anything!"

The interaction has puzzled scholars for centuries, all the way back. Was Mary chiding Jesus? "Jesus, you were supposed to bring wine!" Was Jesus' address disrespectful? Most scholars note that the address to her "Woman", is not to be seen as disrespectful, even unusually formal. It does however show, to use psychological terms, he had clearly finished the process of differentiation from his mother! Remember when she and his brothers and sisters had come to him, afraid that he was going overboard with this messianic business, and he said in their hearing: "Who is my mother, my brothers, my sisters? They are those who do the will of my Abba in heaven?"

What about his words, “My hour has not yet come?” Now we see the handprint of John. John has constructed his gospel with seven signs, or miracles, leading to the final sign of Jesus’ glorification on the Cross and Resurrection. “Hour” in John points all the way through to this final hour. Was this final hour on Jesus’ mind? Or, perhaps was he saying, “It’s not time for my ministry to be revealed?”

IV

So now Mary goes to the wine steward and says: “Do whatever he tells you.” It is touching her confidence in her son. She must have seen many times that through her son the glory of heaven spilled over.

Jesus told the servants to fill up the six stone water jars; they were not the size of peanut butter jars, each held 20 gallons of water, so 120 gallons!

Then Jesus told them to dip some out and take to the steward of the feast who had studied wine making in France. (kidding) When he tasted it, it was not H₂O but wine, and not just any wine but the finest of aged wines. Startled, he said, I paraphrase here:

“Most people serve the choice wine first, then later when their taste buds are saturated and less discriminating, the cheap stuff. But you have kept the good wine back until now!”

The first miracle of Jesus. He worked his first miracle to save a party

V

What are we to think of this miracle, or anything called a miracle? We need not scramble to rationalize the miracle away. Some modern scholars have argued that were so dazzled by Jesus' appearance that they only *thought* they were tasting wine!

Here is the only place I know where Unitarians and Southern Baptists agree on an interpretation of a miracle. Liberal Unitarians don't believe in supernatural miracles, so the guests only thought they were tasting wine. Conservative Southern Baptists don't believe in *wine*! So again, the guests only thought they were tasting wine!

Some try to disprove miracles. They need a Jesus who was like them. Others try to prove them. Why follow a simply human Jesus? Well, what can we say about them? First, they are all startling, something that temporarily challenges our everyday assumptions. Secondly, we might think of them as compressed moments of goodness that point to what God is doing all the time! Jesus heals a child, but God is healing bodies every day. Jesus took water and changed it into wine. But God is taking water and making grapes all the time.

Wine is earth and water and sun and time. A miracle. Bread is water, earth and sun and time. A miracle.

Miracles, they point to what God desires for all, every day.

VI

So we might ask, What is this sign pointing to? What new awareness does Jesus want to dawn on us? He's not just saving a party, he is trying to save the world, our worlds too!

In John's gospel he is always giving us stories with many layers of meaning. On the surface the steward is cracking jokes about the quality of the wine. On a deeper level the drama of salvation is being played out.

120 gallons of water turned to wine. It's about the superabundance of the Kingdom of God all around us! We have no stingy God. The Hebrew Scriptures prophesied that in the latter days there would be a superabundance of wine. Indeed the book of Baruch in the Apocrypha prophesied that the earth would yield its fruit a thousandfold, so that each vine would have a thousand branches, and each branch a thousand clusters and each cluster a thousand grapes and each grape would yield, yes, a 120 gallons of wine! Was Jesus saying that all the wine in these six jars was but one grape of one cluster of one branch of one vine in the

kingdom of God? Was he saying that the kingdom of God was joy? And that this joy was full and would last forever? Yes; I think that.

Jesus knows our need for joy. This joy is more than happiness, for happiness depends on what *happens!* Joy is our reservoir of a deeper kind of happiness that is like a spring of welling up within us.

I think this human experience of joy is what theologians call a “common grace”, that is a grace given to all God’s children in the world— not a church-only grace. So we can say not only “Where the kingdom is, there is joy”, but also, “Wherever there is joy, there is the Kingdom!”

These words of the poet Mary Oliver capture the grace of joy:

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy

don’t hesitate. Give into it....

whatever it is, don’t be afraid

of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.²

God does not measure out joy with a medicine dropper!

When do you feel joy? Not the kind you can buy or earn, but comes as pure grace, unbidden, by surprise? Like laughter, not the hard kind, at other’s expense, but the soft kind, the giggling kind, the kind that lets you be gentler with yourself

and others. Or the belly laughs where your whole body gets in to the act? That's why Anne Lamott calls laughter "carbonated holiness."

Commercials try to sell you joy, but only God can give it. In these days where the current politics can rob you of joy, joy can be a saving thing. It can help dissipate despair.

I've heard so many church members over the years come back mystified after going to impoverished countries and seeing the joy on children's faces in conditions we would think of as intolerable. Do we think Jesus has saved joy for the well off and well-scrubbed? I'm not romanticizing poverty. I am de-romanticizing wealth, as if we think the kingdom of God can only ride in on the horse of Capitalism!

The wine steward said: "But he has kept the good wine until now." The wine will not run out. The joy of the kingdom is running over and will last forever. Don't give up on joy, on love, on life.

VII

I go back to Dostoevsky's novel. In it, Father Zossima, an old priest who has lived his whole life in the incredible joy of the kingdom dies. His body lies in a coffin in a monastery. Alyosha, a young man who loved Father Zossima comes into the room and hears a priest reading scripture over the coffin. He is reading

the Wedding Feast at Cana from John's gospel. Alyosha kneels to pray, falls asleep and begins to dream. He dreams of the wedding feast; the couple, the guests, Jesus, they are all there. As the dream goes on the room of the wedding feast begins to expand, larger and larger, until now Alyosha is in the room! Then an old man gets up and comes toward him. It is Father Zossima, not in the coffin but part of the wedding feast! He calls to Alyosha and says,

Why have you hidden yourself here, out of sight? We are making merry, we are drinking new wine, the wine of a new, great joy.

Then the old priest points to Jesus and says: "He is changing water into wine.... He is expecting new guests, He is calling new ones unceasingly for ever and ever."³

That room at Cana has expanded wider and wider, until it includes us here today, 2000 years later. And John the gospel writer comes to us and says, "Why are you hidden away? Come join the feast. He is changing water into wine. He is expecting new guests, he is calling new ones unceasingly, forever and ever!" Us, too!

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1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Heritage, 1949), 277.
 2. Mary Oliver, "Don't Hesistate".

3. Dostoevsky, op.cit., 278-79.