

First Presbyterian Church
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Wedding at Cana – John 2:1-12 – January 17, 2016

Not unlike today, weddings in the first century were a big deal. However they were quite different than what most of us are used to. The wedding festivities occurred over seven days and hosts invited as many people as possible, especially distinguished guests like prominent teachers and leaders in the community. It was a time of great celebration for everyone, not just the wedding couple. The groom's family was in charge of the food and refreshments at this weeklong party. To run out of wine was just about the worst thing that could happen. New guests were always arriving, and the groom was obligated to provide food and drink for everyone. It would be embarrassing to run out of either one. For Jewish feasts, wine was essential. The rabbis said, "Without wine there is no joy." When the fruit of the vine ran out, the delight dried up.

The wine itself was rather weak compared to our standards. But to run out of wine during this most joyous of celebrations was a severe breach of etiquette – an affront to the duties of hospitality, causing tremendous shame on the hosts.

So the wedding at Cana. Cana was not a large city. It was more like a backwater village, a tiny dot on the map. A surprisingly obscure place for Jesus to make such a dramatic move. The mother of Jesus was apparently serving in some sort of hostess role, and she was aware of the dilemma with the wine. She turned to her son and wanted it to do something to make it right. To keep this family from embarrassment and shame.

Jesus response indicates he is hesitant to get involved, wondering if this is the moment to act, to set his ministry into motion. He knows that if he intervenes, his life will change forever. Once he embarks on this journey, he knows there is no turning back. Once he calls attention to himself, all eyes will start to notice him. And some of those eyes will not be happy with what they see. His mother seems to realize his hesitation, and steps back, allowing him to make the decision to act or not.

Using six large stone jars used for purification rites of handwashing, Jesus has the servants fill them to the brim with water. The resulting wine is extremely fine. This was an extravagant turn of events – from water came a shocking abundance of superior wine.

It's the symbolism that shows the message behind the event. Here we have the image of new wine in old vessels. The jars were previously used to hold the water of purification for the Jewish people, a religious ritual, and now they were overflowing with a wondrous new and extravagant gift. The gospel writer is comparing the old way of doing religion with a new way, brought about by Jesus Christ. Jesus isn't rejecting Judaism. It's really more of an extreme makeover. Here stand six empty stone water jars, waiting to be filled. Here stands a people, waiting for the hope that had been promised to them. That hope has finally arrived, in extravagantly abundant proportions. It is the first sign in John's gospel, symbolizing the overwhelming abundance of grace available to all through Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament an abundance of good wine symbolizes the joyous arrival of God's new age. From the ninth chapter of Amos, "The time is surely coming, says the Lord...the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it." And from the third chapter of Joel, "In 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; a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord." With the symbolism of the dawning of a new age, this passage of John does more than simply stand as the first act in Jesus' ministry, but also it is the inaugural act of God's promised salvation. It points the way and gives direction for what is to come.

The writer of the gospel calls this event the first of Jesus' signs. One that revealed his glory and resulted in his disciples believing in him. The function of any sign is to point us to something or to give us instruction. For example, when we're driving down the road and see a red octagonal sign at an intersection, we know to stop. If we're in an unfamiliar place, we look for signs to show us where we are.

Like traffic signs, the signs in John's gospel point us to something and give us instruction. These signs instruct us about the identity of Jesus, revealing his divinity. This first sign shows both God's power through the miracle and points to the significance of the miracle. In Jesus Christ God has inaugurated the plan of salvation, and by God's extravagant grace, that salvation will be available to all people.

Who saw the sign? The servants. They followed Jesus' instructions, filling the jars with water and taking the new wine to the head steward. The disciples and Mary also saw what happened. And because of what they saw, they believed in Jesus. In this abundance of good, new wine, the disciples saw the sign of God's presence among them. And in turn, they believed in Jesus. The miracle of the wine shatters the boundaries of the conventional world, and the disciples were willing to reshape their own worldview to allow this extravagant entrance of God into their midst.

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus not only saved the day for a young couple about to embark on their lives together, but Jesus started his own journey. In the season of Epiphany, we experience how God is made manifest through Jesus to the world. Jesus Christ is about transformation. Transforming what was old into something new. In him there is abundance. In him there is extravagance. In him there are new possibilities.

The order of the material world becomes altered when we allow Christ into our lives. Like the disciple, who saw and believed, we are presented with the signs. How we respond corresponds with the level at which we allow Christ to transform us. When we believe, our lives will bear evidence to the extravagant transformation that Jesus brings. The old will become new. Empty vessels will overflow with the abundance of God's grace. When Jesus is present in one's life, there comes a new quality that is like turning water into wine. William Barclay wrote, "Without Jesus, life is dull and stale and flat; when Jesus comes, life becomes vivid and sparkling and exciting. Without Jesus life is drab and uninteresting; with him it is thrilling and exhilarating."

Jesus redefines and transforms everything we know and understand about the world. What was once simple water is now extravagant wine – the wine of the new covenant. Word has become flesh. In Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God has arrived.

