

John 2:1-12 – He Turned the Water into Wine¹

Before the Lesson: Prepare AV equipment for the 3-minute video in the Information Session: “Johnny Cash - He Turned the Water into Wine - Live at San Quentin”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fE09xqZYBLI>

Fellowship Question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, to begin discussion, and lead into the study):

When did you last attend a wedding? Whose was it? Where?

What is your favorite kind of wine?

Information

Today’s story takes place in the town of Cana of Galilee.

“Much later, in John 21:2, we learn that Nathanael was from Cana, so perhaps a geographical linkage may be drawn from the tradition about Nathanael in the closing words of chapter 1, in which Jesus promises Nathanael that he will see greater things to come, and this first ‘sign’ of Jesus performed in Cana.”²

Have you ever been to a wedding where something went horribly wrong?

There is a huge “wedding reception fail” in today’s Scripture. It is a story that appears only in John’s Gospel.

- Have a class member read John 2:1-12.

Today’s wedding ceremonies take from 20 minutes to an hour. A reception normally follows which takes 30 minutes to several hours, depending on the food served, the program, the dance, etc. However, in Jesus’ day, the reception was much more extensive.

“Families often went deeply in debt trying to outdo each other in the honorific competition to provide the best wedding the village had ever seen. Because a wedding celebration would often include a whole village, arrangements were usually quite elaborate and could take many days to complete...Such wedding celebrations traditionally began on a Wednesday and lasted seven days if the bride was a virgin and if the family and its village had enough resources.”³

¹ This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2023. More lessons may be found at greatbibleteachers.com.

² Mark A. Matson, *John*, Interpretation Bible Studies (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 19.

³ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 70f.

We can only imagine how expensive this would be – and how socially embarrassing it could be not to have enough food or wine.

One of the expectations of guests was that they would bring gifts, including wine, with them to this lengthy celebration. Mary, Jesus, and Jesus’ disciples would have been such guests. So, running out of wine meant both that the family of the groom had not prepared well and that the guests did not bring enough gifts. At this point, everyone loses.

Jesus’ mother is never called by her name in the Gospel of John. She is always “the mother of Jesus.” According to one author, this was “the respectful way of referring to a woman who has borne a son; the birth of a son defines the woman as a complete adult person.”⁴

What did Jesus’ mother say to him? What do you imagine the emotion behind her words was? (pity, embarrassment, guilt, the urgency to act, etc.)

Remember that 30 years before this celebration, Joseph and Mary married. It was a socially complicated situation. We are not given any details about their ceremony or reception, but it is easy to imagine that there was a lot of slanderous gossip about this pregnant, merely-betrothed bride. How do you think her experience transferred to this wedding reception?

Mary is not merely “wine-ing.” What was Mary “really” saying to Jesus? (Do something! We need to help. Work a miracle. Etc.)

Jesus’ response is somewhat surprising. What was he “really” saying to Mary? (You’re no longer in charge of me; I’m not ready; this is their problem, let them solve it; etc.)

“His words were not an act of rudeness to his mother, but are an important assertion of Jesus’ freedom from all human control.”⁵

What does Mary say next, to the servants?

One author says, “I have this image of the mother of Jesus much like encouraging your child to get on the school bus for the first time: ‘Come on, you can do it! I know you can!’ But, I also wonder what she saw at that moment. What had Jesus revealed to her up to that point that would cause her to believe that such a miracle was possible from him? How did she know that this was the time for revelation, the event of Epiphany?”⁶

What do you think was going on in Mary? What was going on between Mary and her son, Jesus?

⁴ Malina, 66.

⁵ Gail R. O’Day, “John”, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Woman’s Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 295.

⁶ Karoline Lewis. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1556

“Despite Jesus’ seeming rebuff of her, his mother tells the servants with utter confidence that Jesus will do something. His mother is thus a model disciple: she trusts that Jesus will act and allows him to act in freedom.”⁷

Let’s consider Mary’s roles in this story. Mary is Jesus’ mother, of course. She may also be considered a follower or a disciple of Jesus. She had a third role that is very important in the Middle Eastern collectivist society - Mary is a mediator.

“A wedding is about more than just the nuptials of two people; it is a community event that usually results in a community’s verdict on the marriage and the importance of the families in the community. Jesus’ mother has some role in a wedding in Cana, less than ten miles from Nazareth... This is more than a catering mishap. The social standing of the family is at risk. It may be thought that the family is stingy or that they don’t really value the bride and groom. Mary acts as broker and comes to Jesus to ask him to help... Mary successfully brokers between the family and Jesus.”⁸

Hands and feet were to be washed before entering a home and before eating. Most families had a single water jar that stood about waist high. Here, there are six! That may indicate that the village was supportive in lending more jars and/or that this was a large gathering, therefore many jars were needed. Either way, the water in the jars was low, so Jesus commanded they be refilled.

Could Jesus have refilled the jars without anyone’s help? If he could snap his fingers and miraculously refill the jars, why didn’t he do so?

Think about this experience from the servants’ point of view. The water to be used from these jars that day has already been used. There is no logical reason to refill them. One must go to the well and refill 120-180 gallons. That would be many, many trips to the well. Were you a servant, what might be going through your mind?

How could we relate the servants’ experience with our own spiritual lives?

Jesus turned the water into wine. We might call this a miracle. But John doesn’t use the word miracle. What does he call it in verse 11?

John’s gospel presents seven “signs.”

1. Changing water to wine (2:1-11)
2. Healing the royal official’s son in Capernaum (4:46-54)
3. Healing the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-18)
4. Feeding the 5,000 (6:5-14)
5. Walking on the water (6:16-24)

⁷ O’Day, 295.

⁸ E. Randolph Richards and Richard James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 122, 123.

6. Healing the man born blind (9:1-7)
7. Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-45)

The number seven is significant in Hebrew thought, as an indicator of completion.

Johnny Cash wrote a song, “He Turned the Water Into Wine” that includes three of these signs.

[Play the 3-minute video: “Johnny Cash - He Turned the Water into Wine - Live at San Quentin”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fE09xqZYBLI>]

Although John describes seven “signs” in his Gospel, there were many more.

- Have a class member read John 20:30-31.

John seems to steer away from the word, “miracle”, maybe because he was concerned that his readers would focus more on the *what* than the *who*.

“In John, these sort of actions - changing water into wine, for example - are not ‘miracles’ - they are *signs*. John does *not* want us to look at them; he wants us to look at what they point to. It is a complete mis-reading of this text to respond, ‘Wow! I wonder *how* he did that?’ John wants us to respond, ‘Wow! I wonder *who* did that?’ Wasting time discussing the sign is like going to a fabulous restaurant and spending the evening talking about the menu instead of enjoying the feast.”⁹

What do we learn about “who did that” from this story?

Transformational Exercise

In our first lesson, we noted that the Gospel of John is “a Gospel of Abundance.” We certainly see that in the creation of a hundred gallons of wine!

“Jesus has brought about something completely unexpected yet, in retrospect, both completely appropriate to the situation and more than a response to it - there is an abundance that goes beyond all needs... The glory of Jesus... can be manifested again and again and is inexhaustibly rich, generative, surprising - and even intoxicating. And when it happens, often in quiet ways, some perceive it and some do not, then as now.”¹⁰

One thing we might learn from these “sign” stories is that the life of a disciple is an abundant life.

⁹ David Ewart.

<http://www.holytextures.com/2013/01/john-2-1-11-year-c-epiphany-2-january-14-january-20.html>

¹⁰ David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 64.

- Have a class member read John 10:10.

How does your version translate that last phrase? (KJV: “more abundantly”; NIV: “to the full”; GNT: “life in all its fullness”, NRSV: “abundantly”, etc.)

[Write on the board the words, “abundance” and “scarcity”.]

How does today’s story illustrate a life of abundance?

What does today’s story say about an attitude of scarcity?

[Read or summarize the following quote:]

“We must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity -- a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.

“The gospel story of abundance asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being. The baptismal service declares that each of us has been miraculously loved into existence by God. And the story of abundance says that our lives will end in God, and that this well-being cannot be taken from us... What we know about our beginnings and our endings, then, creates a different kind of present tense for us. We can live according to an ethic whereby we are not driven, controlled, anxious, frantic, or greedy, precisely because we are sufficiently at home and at peace to care about others as we have been cared for.”¹¹

In today’s story, vessels of water were refilled and transformed to become wine. Shame was transformed to wonder. Embarrassment was transformed to joy.

In the next few moments of silence, consider this question. Is my typical mindset one of scarcity or abundance?

[After a few moments of silence, close in a prayer something like this: *God, you provide for us in normal and in surprising ways. These are signs that you care and that you love. Open our spirits so we can see and appreciate these signs. Forgive us for the attitudes of scarcity that lead us to hoard what is to be shared. Fill our souls to the brim and transform us. Amen.*]

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann. “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity.” *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999. <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533>