



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“The Power to Faith”

John 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity begins

Why do some people “get” God, and some do not? You see it in crowds—Billy Graham issues an invitation at a rally, and hundreds come to the infield to give their lives to God. Some of the hundreds in the stands have already done so, and they are cheered to see so many “go forward”. But that leaves other hundreds still in the stands, unconvinced or afraid. How can we explain that?

You see it in families. A mother and father are strong Christians. Perhaps the first-born son finds a connection with the Living God through Jesus, but his younger brother, just two years behind him, could not care less. Same home, same church family. But one gets God and one does not. And this goes on for years, as the parents continue to try not to worry about “son number two”.

But this is nothing new. We see the same pattern in Scripture. Take our focus story, from John’s Gospel, chapter 2. Go ahead and find John 2, and we’ll read the account of Jesus’ first “sign”, as John calls it. Remember, John gives us a gospel that is all about Jesus revealing himself as God and the way to God. John doesn’t do it in stories about Jesus, he does it more with speeches from Jesus, and “signs” like this one we walk into, today. I’ll use Eugene Peterson’s Bible paraphrase he calls, *The Message*, so it may be a bit different to your ears. Listen with me for God’ Word TO US THIS MORNING, as I read these words aloud. *[text: John 2:1-11]*

There is a LOT here to notice! I wonder what stuck out to you? I have a lot of questions. Since this is the first of what John calls “the signs of Jesus”, we need to talk about a “sign”; but we also need to talk about “the hour” (or, “the time”), which seems to be a word so full of meaning, it spills out all over John’s gospel account. Read the whole gospel in the week ahead, and notice how these terms come up a crucial times.

Let’s take it from the top.

“Three days later. . . “ Later than what? That drives us back to the earlier chapter, and there we find the account of John the Baptizer pointing to Jesus and saying, “Behold the Lamb of God.” John had been talking for months about “one who is to come, whose sandals I’m not good enough to touch.” Pointing to Jesus and saying, “Here’s the Lamb of God,” it’s a signal to his disciples that Jesus is “the guy” John’s been talking about. So these disciples leave John and start following Jesus. [How hard that must have been for John, in a way. I think he’d only be human if it didn’t pain him to see his disciples leave, since they’d been together for some time. But John knew his role, and bringing disciples to Jesus would be one of the best things to do to fulfill his own mission.] THESE are the disciples who go with Jesus and his mother to this wedding.

As for the story itself, it’s pretty simple. Jesus is at a wedding. A wedding in Palestine is a whole-community affair, including up to seven days of celebrations with food and fun. With Jesus and some of his disciples, “the mother of Jesus” are there. (Mary is never named in this gospel; she’s always “the mother of Jesus”.)

To support so many days of partying, all the guests were expected to contribute food or drink. We don’t know how long the celebration has been going by this part of the story, but Jesus’ mother says to him, “We got a problem here. They’re running out of wine.”

It may be that Jesus and the boys didn’t bring wine enough for themselves and to share with others—a rather rude omission. Mary could be indirectly pointing out this fact. Or, maybe she just spots the problem. Or, maybe John sees this as a companion piece to the Feeding of the 5000 soon to come—bread and wine, as in “The Lord’s Supper”. But from the way Mary says it, what Jesus says in response shows it was clear to him that his mom expected him to do something about the problem, somehow.

Interesting what he says. “And this is our problem, *why?*” And he says, as if to state the reason for his distancing himself from the problem, “This isn’t my time.”

What the heck does that mean? He’s not saying, “I’m too busy, I’m too important, I don’t have the time.” The Greek word Jesus uses for “time” here is not the word for the “time of day” or for “an amount of time”. It’s the Greek word that means, “appointed time,” “planned time.” It’s like there a plan going on behind the scenes—not even connected with this wedding—and it’s got a schedule; this isn’t on the schedule. Jesus is saying, “It’s not appropriate to ask me to stop and fix this.”

I love this next part. It’s like Mary isn’t listening to her son—or doesn’t get what he’s saying, or has total confidence in him. She looks to the servants and says to them, “My son can fix this. Just do what he tells you to do.”

Now, what? How can Jesus refuse? He wants to “honor his father and mother”, as a good Jewish boy, but this is not in the plan. (Also, isn’t it kind of a trivial thing, compared to “real Biblical miracles” like parting the Red Sea or something?)

Six big stone jars are around the edge of the host’s house. These could have been for the “mikva” ritual baths women were to take after their menstrual flow had stopped, but probably they held the water for the ritual hand-washing everyone was supposed to do before the meal. The fact that they were stone is worth noting; jars carved from the rock not only were expensive, but they also wouldn’t pick up contamination like the porous clay jugs and urns would, and so they were thought to keep the water more pure—as you would want for a ritual washing.

“Fill those up with water,” Jesus says. And the servants do it—probably pouring from pitchers into these big pots that hold 20-30 gallons each. That’s a lot of water, and it had to take a while. After they’ve filled the pitchers, Jesus tells them to take some pitchers of that same water to the caterer or impresario or servant who is running the party.

Meanwhile, this caterer has been getting more and more worried. He’s the one responsible for making sure the party is a success, and he knows how little wine is left. He doesn’t want to face the disappointment of his master or client if the wine is gone and the many guests get restless. So he takes a pitcher from one of the servants who had been assigned to the “wine detail”, and tastes it. Whoa! Here’s a guy who can’t drink so much on the job that he can’t still run the show; so he’s sober enough to tell this is great wine, far better than the client had ordered. This is “the good stuff”, and the caterer calls to the father of the groom with a laugh, “Hey, Harry—you’ve been holding out! Only now you bring out the good stuff, when people have had too much to drink to really appreciate it?!”

And in addition, Jesus had made this HUGE quantity of wine—it’s ridiculous--some 120 to 180 gallons. They’ll never drink it all. It’s a superabundance of wine. This is going to be some celebration! And perhaps there’s a wink in our direction on this; Jesus provides joy—wine was a frequent symbol for the joy of God’s heavenly banquet for the faithful—and Jesus provides so much, it’s a flood of joy with Jesus!

Well, that’s the plot. But John adds a few more words as the narrator: “This act in Cana was the first “sign” Jesus gave, the first glimpse of his glory. And his disciples believed in him.”

Ah! A “sign” is a “glimpse of Jesus’ glory”. (“Glory” is also a big word in John’s gospel—put it on your list, before you read the whole of it.) Apparently we’re going to get more of these “signs” in the pages ahead.

But the word John uses for “the first sign” does not mean “the first of a series”. John uses the word he used at the start of his gospel, the Greek word “arkay”, which means, “beginning”. This is the inauguration, the kick-off, the launch of Jesus’ public ministry, but not in a way he had planned it.

Now, this last sentence. “And his disciples believed in him.” This seems weak. What did they believe? Did they believe Jesus was the only-born Son of God, the Savior of humanity and the Lord of Life . . . because he did what his mother asked him to do? Hard to say. The disciples’ previous teacher, John the Baptizer, had given his disciples a push toward Jesus. Now in the first ministry act of Jesus they witness, they have seen something that’s ‘way out of the limits of ordinary experience, even if it’s a modest miracle that only a small group of witnesses know. Maybe his disciples did catch a glimpse of the glory of God in that moment.

But one of the other points to notice today is who didn’t “believe in him”. The party workers did not become disciples, even though they had the best grip on what Jesus had done; they had even been enlisted to help carry it off, literally. And we don’t see Jesus’ mother suddenly confessing Jesus is her Lord. She’s still “the mother of Jesus”, his parent (even though Jesus is a grown adult, now). Some “got God” in Jesus, some did not. How come?

The answer to this mystery of faith is, “the Holy Spirit.” It’s the Holy Spirit that tugs someone over the goal line of faith. It’s the Holy Spirit who gives someone “the power to faith”, or “the power to trust”. (I always prefer the word “trust” to “believe”, or “to have faith”.)

Here’s my basis for that answer—it’s in our middle text today, from Paul’s first Letter to the Christians at Corinth, chapter 12. (Listen for God!) [*text: 1 Corinthians 12:1-3*]

Paul goes on about the Holy Spirit’s work, giving gifts for ministry to each of us, so that we can build up the Body of Christ. The same Spirit that leads someone to trust Jesus gives special abilities and aptitudes and attitudes each believer is to put to work for others’ benefit in the church and beyond.

So when I pray for the list of people who, as we say in our group prayer time on Sundays, “are far from God”, or “for whom we want *the lights to go on about God*,” I’m praying that God will send His Spirit to help people grasp what is beyond human words and concepts and most any rational argument alone.

God blows our categories. God is beyond the power of our language to capture accurately--which is wonderful, but it makes us so helpless if we’re trying to “make” someone believe. We can’t do it.

What we can do is tell our faith stories--the times God has shown up in our lives, perhaps by meeting needs we may not even have known we had, and how that made us want to use our lives to work with Him on His passion to love the world. Then we simply ask, “Did I say that clearly?”, and “Have you had God show up in your life like that?” (And all the time, we are praying like crazy that God’s Spirit will capture that person’s heart with the thrill of following Jesus, giving them “the power to faith.”)

Don’t you have some people you care enough about, to want them to have “the power to faith?”

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on January 17, 2010, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]