

## “Signs”

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John 2: 1-11

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This is a familiar story, so familiar in fact that we sometimes think we know what it's about without really paying attention to it.

Sometimes we say it's the wedding feast in Cana, for instance. We talk about how Jesus attended the wedding and participated in the festivities afterward.

Other times we call it the miracle of the water being turned into wine. We talk about the power Jesus has to change things.

But the story really isn't about the wedding. And it isn't about the reception, either, although that is where it takes place. Nor is the story just about Mary and her relationship with Jesus. It isn't even about the disciples who, after all, only began following him in the paragraph immediately preceding this one.

And as much as we might call this the miracle of changing water into wine, it isn't about the super-abundance of wine, either.

In fact, John doesn't even refer to it as a miracle. He calls it a sign. In the entire Gospel of John, you will be hard pressed to find any “miracle.” In this gospel they are all referred to as signs – some of which are admittedly miraculous.

Whether miraculous or not, a sign points to something beyond itself; it directs our attention away from the sign, away from the event or the miracle, to that which is more important. In this case, as in every other case in the Gospel of John, the sign points us to Jesus, whose glory we are witnessing.

But the sign is easy to miss.

In the introduction to his book, *Building Successful Teams*, Bill Butterworth tells about a concert he attended at Carnegie Hall. It was for the All-American High School choir concert in which his son had won a seat. He wasn't surprised to learn that almost everyone in attendance was the parent or a relative of one of the singers, but it didn't matter – because this was still Carnegie Hall. He was there to see his son on the stage.

What did matter, however, was that he came all the way from California to hear his son sing – and he had to listen first to the All-American *Elementary* School Choir and the Middle School Choir as well as a violin duet by two very young students – who, he says, had the smallest violins he had ever seen.

When the moment finally came for the High School Choir to go on stage, he saw his tall son standing in the back row where no one but his dad could recognize him. But to Bill it was still OK. This was Carnegie Hall and his son was on the stage.

The room hushed as the choir took their places and waited.

Then a man came out and the crowd began a vigorous applause – which ended abruptly when the man retrieved the music stand the violinists had left behind. He was only a stage hand, not the choir director.

And then, Bill thought, when was the last time you saw a crowd of people give such an ovation to a stage hand? Maybe never. And yet the stage hand had quite an important role to play in the production.

I watched a movie last week. It was an older movie and I noticed that the film credits were at the beginning of the movie instead of at the end as they are in most new films. I don't know when that was changed, but it has probably always been the case that most people don't pay too much attention to them.

The film credits are about the stage hands, not the primary or star actors and the story line.

In our text today, Jesus is the hero of the story. But there is no applause for him. That's reserved for the groom when the banquet master tasted the best wine that he had unknowingly saved for last. Jesus is treated more like a stage hand than a hero, someone who works behind the scenes to provide for the needs of people who don't even know what he did.

The sign is pointing us beyond the physical events of that day, however. The sign is reminding us of the larger story of Jesus coming among us in human form. As John so eloquently says in the prologue to the Gospel: "the Word became flesh" and lived among us."

The creator of the universe became a stage hand. And if we're not careful, we may not see the signs pointing us in his direction.

"Jesus did this, the first of his signs," we read, "in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."

He revealed his glory, but the only people who seem to have noticed were the disciples. Why only them?

Well, let's think again about the wedding feast in Cana. What do we know about the wedding? Very little, really.

We know that among the guests were Mary, Jesus, and the disciples.

We don't know whose wedding it was or what time of year it was. Some authors I read think that this was the wedding of John - the author of this Gospel and Salome.

That would make Mary the aunt and account for her deep concern about how things were going at the reception.

We don't know how many guests there were, but there were enough to run out of wine.

We don't know who the designated drivers were, nor do we know if the wine ran out on the first day of the wedding feast or the last day (although I suspect that had Jesus done nothing it would have been the last day of the feast either way.)

We do know there were servants – so it may have been a catered event.

We also know there were some stone jars there, rather large ones, in fact. So large that I'm not sure how they would have carried them once they were full. At 25 gallons each, the water alone would have weighed 200 pounds. I don't know what they would have weighed empty, but I'm certain they would have required more than one person to lift.

So imagine the scene.

Jesus is in the kitchen with the servants. Mary tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do – and they obey as if she is either the head caterer or the mistress of the house.

Jesus tells them to fill the water jars and they do. I don't know where they were – but if they were for ritual cleaning, it would have been in a public place like the front door, a garden gate or entryway. Conceivably they were in the kitchen, if it were a small house – but with six jars, my guess is it was a large house and a large family.

Rather than move all six jars, they must have taken buckets of water from the well to the jars. It would have become a publicly noticed event as the servants trooped through carrying water for the jars.

I don't know how many trips that would take or how far away they were from the well, but if I had been one of the servants, I know I would begin to wonder what was going on. I'm sure some of the guests did, too.

It was a rather foolish looking errand to run in a time of crisis. There is no wine, and Jesus tells them to make sure the household is prepared for religious obligations. It's like us running out of milk at home and me telling Jerry to sweep the front porch– or maybe a better analogy is telling him to wash the dishes.

Then Jesus tells them to do something even more foolish: he tells them to serve the water. Put the water used to wash your hands and feet into a cup and serve it to the head waiter, the maitre d', the chief steward.

As foolish as it seems, the servants do what he tells them to do. They trust him even though it doesn't make any sense at all.

The bridegroom's family is vulnerable here. A failure of etiquette will leave a lasting stigma on their reputation. That vulnerability is now being carried by the kitchen help – servants who are preparing to serve what we might consider dish water.

A failure now may shift the blame from the groom's family to the catering business, but it will be a disaster either way; meanwhile Jesus disappears from the story. He isn't seen again; nor does he speak – not until he is out of there.

Meanwhile the groom is praised for serving such delightful wine while the disciples turn and recognize the glory of God and put their trust where the servants did – in Jesus.

None of the guests at the wedding feast know where the wine came from. Not even the groom knows its source. But in this small, out of the way town, a town not even mentioned in the Old Testament, the event serves as a sign pointing us to Jesus.

And it's only recognized by those who trust him.

Only they give the stage hand an ovation, only they know what he has done.

Where does that leave us? Do we trust Jesus enough to recognize the signs of his presence around us? Or are we like the vast majority of the guests at the wedding and only receive the miracles of God's grace without acknowledging their true source?

Or perhaps the more important question has to do with the “sign” that was pointing to Jesus. How and where and when have we been like a stage hand that points others to the glory of God? Where and when have we allowed ourselves to look like fools in our attempt to follow God?

Most of us like to be in control. As such, we are loathe to put ourselves in such a vulnerable position.

But unless we do, we may not see the stage hand.

And until we do, we may not know what it means to trust in God.

Trust is built by trusting. It's risky, it's sometimes really hard. But to grow closer to God we have to pay attention, to listen, and take a step with trust.