

“You only get one first impression.” This is sort of a marketing cliché, but it captures a real truth. The way you break onto the scene forever affects how people look at you from then on. And in our Epiphany account today, we see Jesus' *first* miracle, the *beginning* of the signs that He performed. This is the first step that Jesus Himself takes in establishing His identity, in revealing Himself to the world.

And so when Jesus works this wonder at the wedding in Cana, we learn a great deal about our Savior: We see His *power*: Jesus does something that is *not humanly possible* by transforming water into wine. We see His *authority*: he steps out from under His mother's jurisdiction, and secures the devotion of his disciples. We see His *purpose*: in this miracle, Jesus takes what was used for Jewish purification rites, and transforms them into something better, a picture of the Old Covenant being surpassed by the New. And when this miracle shows us these things about Jesus, we are seeing His *glory*.

Here is the glory of Jesus' power: This wedding was probably the wedding of close family friends of Mary and Joseph, since it seems like Mary is helping to host the wedding – she is already there when Jesus and His disciples are invited, and when the wine runs out, Mary tries to solve the problem. And she doesn't go to Joseph, or to the master of the feast, and she especially doesn't bother the bridegroom. Even though Jesus has not yet done any such miracles, Mary turns to her Son, expecting that He is able.

Here's a lesson for us: Mary's faith means turning to Jesus for help before anyone else. Is that where you turn? In your heart, is your immediate reaction to the problems you face: “Jesus can fix it!” How much worry and anxiety could you spare yourself if you believed that no matter what the problem is, talking to Jesus is the first step towards solving it! That's faith in action.

And this faith is absolutely justified: we don't know what Mary knew that prompted her to get Jesus involved, since He hadn't begun His ministry yet, but Mary believed that Jesus was able to help, and her faith was well-founded. Her Son had the power to transform water into wine. It's such a familiar story that you do not have cold shivers run down your spine, but think about that. Jesus speaks a few words, and water obeys Him. We can barely get our *children* to obey us! And I'll tell you, it does not matter how many times you discipline water, or how much ice cream you promise water, water does not obey you.

But water has been obeying Jesus ever since He spoke water into being, ever since His servant Moses divided the sea, ever since His servant Elijah made an axe head float. And water will keep obeying Jesus as He walks over its surface, and when He says to it, “Peace, be still.” Jesus' power over water should have you trembling in awe. Who is this man that water obeys Him and Him alone? The glory of Jesus is revealed through His power over the water.

But the interesting thing about verse 11 is that John does not focus on this miracle as an exercise of power. He doesn't use the common word for *miracle* (*dunamis*); he uses the word *sign* (*semeia*). What Jesus does here points beyond the power to the meaning of Jesus' action, more meaning that simply "Jesus is powerful." That is absolutely true, and you should stand in awe of Jesus, but the focus is on the *meaning* of the sign. And we start to understand what the sign means by looking at the strange answer that Jesus gives to Mary. She comes to Jesus and expectantly tells him "They have no wine." And He answers, "Woman, what is this to me, and what to you? My hour has not yet come."

Now, when Jesus says "Woman", this sounds much worse in English than it did in Greek. This was a polite and affectionate term. But interestingly, Jesus says "Woman" and not "Mother". And then he talks about *his hour*. That phrase becomes hugely important in the gospels, because it refers primarily to his passion, his atoning death.

And so when we put these things together, we see that something incredibly significant is taking place between Jesus and Mary. It's as if Mary says, "Son, why don't you begin your ministry?" And Jesus answers, "If I do, then your role will change from *mother* to *disciple*. Your involvement in my life will radically change. That sword that Simeon said will pierce your soul will be unsheathed." Because here's the other aspect: by referring to the coming hour, Jesus is hinting at his death. "Once my ministry begins," Jesus is saying, "it starts a journey that ends in my death. Are you ready for that clock to start, for that countdown to begin?"

All mothers struggle when it comes to letting their children go, and they need to be reminded that children are *supposed* to grow up and leave home, but this is more than that. Jesus is asking, "Are you done being my Mother, and are you ready for me to die?" That's what it will mean for Jesus to begin His ministry, for Jesus to manifest His glory. There will be no going back.

Which makes it all the more amazing to watch Mary's faith-filled response. Please don't believe that this is a meddling, manipulative mother badgering her Son into a party trick! Mary believed what the angels and prophets said about Jesus, and no matter how much it cost her to give her Son to God, she valued the glory of God more than she clung to the joys of motherhood.

Moms, pray to God for that faith! Ask God to teach you that lesson when it comes to your own children! God is glorifying Himself when your child leaves home. God is glorifying Himself when your son makes another woman the most important woman in his life, when your daughter leaves to use the skills you've taught her in another home. And here is the sword of motherhood: God is glorified even in things that tear your soul apart. God is glorified in your child's disability. God is glorifying Himself even when your child rejects you and rejects God. God is glorifying Himself even in your child's death.

And it takes faith to look at those realities of motherhood and to keep going. In fact, if Jesus has not come to save the world and make all things new, then motherhood is meaningless, and the sword of motherhood ends only in death. But thanks be to God that Jesus has come to bring new life! Jesus makes all of your suffering, all of your tears, all of those sleepless nights worthwhile, because through your work, through your mothering, God is preparing an eternal weight of glory that will breathe new life into your soul.

You cannot see it now, except by faith. So cry out to God, all you weary mothers, “I believe; help my unbelief.” And God will give you the strength to say along with Mary: “Whatever He says, do it.” Mary has already said *to God*, “Behold, I am your servant; whatever you say, I will do.” and so she calls on the servants to share her faith, and to watch and wait for the glory of God to be revealed.

And when Jesus commands the servants to fill the stone water jars that were used for the Jewish rites of purification, for ceremonial washing, we see His glory revealed in another way. Not only does this sign signify the definitive beginning of Jesus' ministry, it also shows us what that ministry is all about. Jesus takes these marks of Jewishness, these symbols of the Old Covenant, and glorifies them by filling them with new meaning. The weakness of the Old Covenant is transformed into the glory of the New Covenant. The Old Covenant vessels are filled with nothing but water until Jesus comes. But by the command of Jesus, water pots for washing become wine jars for a wedding feast. What was meant to make you *holy* is now used to make you *happy*. Don't ever think that those are opposed to each other, by the way – that God would rather you be holy than happy, or some such nonsense. God uses holiness to bring about happiness. Not by way of replacement, of course. Holiness is still necessary; but Jesus takes care of that purification once and for all, and opens a new and living way for us to enter into the happiness of heaven!

And this is why it's important that we see that *turning water into wine* in the context of a wedding was not a *random* sign. It's not the case any miracle would have done the trick, and it just happened to be this one. John says it is not a miracle, it's a sign; it's not about power, it's about what that power *signifies*, what it *means*. It would not have meant the same thing if Jesus had done a different sort of miracle. Think about this: for Jesus' *first* miracle, for His *first* impression as a mighty prophet and teacher, He didn't perform a healing. He didn't open blind eyes or make a lame man walk. He didn't feed the hungry. He didn't raise a dead man back to life, and His first miracle was not forgiving sins.

Now, He does all of those miracles and more, *later*. They are all essential to His work. They are all glorious and meaningful. But what is Jesus trying to teach us by doing *this* miracle *first*?

Let's look at the differences: would you rather a) be blind or b) run out of wine? a) be crippled for life or b) run out of wine? a) *be dead* or b) run out of wine? I like wine, but in those scenarios, I'm choosing "b" every time! We recognize a fundamental difference between Jesus *restoring a broken body to wholeness* and *making a feast better*. One just seems so much more *important* than the other. Even though it is true, as every commentary will tell you, that weddings meant more in the ancient world than they do today, (for instance, if your groomsman didn't get you a good enough gift, you could sue him), it's hard to see one celebration outweighing an entire life of brokenness. Eyes that see are necessary for a good life; wine is nice, but is it *necessary*?

But Jesus chooses to make wine as his first miracle.

We've compared making wine to the healings; how about the forgiveness of sins? Surely if anything captures the essence of Jesus' ministry, it would be saying to a sinner, "Go in peace, your sins are forgiven.", which the Pharisees recognize as just as much a claim to divine power as saying to lame legs "Rise up and walk." or turning water into wine. You only get *one chance* at a first miracle, Jesus. Why did you choose to turn water into wine?

I don't think we will find the answer by comparing the relative *importance* of the different miracles. All of the miracles manifest Jesus' glory, all of them display His power. But I think that the miracle at Cana tells us something about God and about God's desire for humanity that outlasts sin and brokenness. In this first miracle, the emphasis is not so much on what Jesus came to save us *from*, as on what He came to save us *for*.

Jesus came to bring gladness to the world, gladness like the world has never known, gladness that the world has only ever *glimpsed*. But the clearest glimpses the world has ever gotten of this gladness are found in *wine* and *weddings*. There is no joy in all the world like the joy of a wedding feast where the wine flows freely, where a glorious bridegroom and a beautiful bride are celebrating the consummation of their love. Nowhere is more joyful than a wedding, and nothing makes a wedding feast more joyful than good wine!

And this is not an accident: marriage, Paul reminds us, is a picture of Christ and His Church, and God gave wine to gladden the heart of man. That's what it is for. God was the first one to come up with the idea of weddings, and God was the first one who ever thought to hide wine inside grapes and sugar. And the reason for both is *to teach the world to be glad*, so that we could catch a glimpse of the gladness of God, which He means to share with us.

And in fact, when the last enemy is defeated, and the New Jerusalem descends out of heaven, and the heavens and the earth are made new, there will be *no more healings* and *no more forgiveness of sins*, but the picture we have of life with God in the new creation is that of a wedding

feast, which the prophets have told us is a feast where sweet wine flows down from the mountains, a feast of rich foods and fine wine, where the young men rejoice in the grain, and the young women in the sweet wine, wine that gladdens the heart of God and man.

And so when Jesus tells the servants to draw from the jars and take some to the master of the feast, He is choosing to work a miracle that will reveal His glory, and the glory of God is most clearly shown to us as a wedding feast made festive by the divine provision of gallons of the best wine that Cana had ever tasted. The ministry of Jesus that began at this wedding feast is all about preparing us for the eternal gladness that awaits us at the marriage supper of the Lamb, where all tears are wiped away, where all sins are covered and forgotten, where all sickness and suffering are overcome and done away with.

What does that do for your heart as you consider who Jesus is; who God is, as Jesus reveals the Father to you, and the Holy Spirit confirms this to your spirit. God didn't come first to judge you. He didn't come first to destroy you. He didn't come first to make you better at obeying. He didn't come first to fix you. He came first to make your hearts glad. Who is like our God? Who else compares to Him?

Jesus says, "I want you to share in God's eternal joy, and the reason I invented weddings and the reason I made wine was so that you could understand gladness." When Jesus turns water in wine at a wedding, He is preserving that picture of gladness. He is pulling back the veil and showing you heaven's joy. And by fulfilling His ministry, when His hour comes, He allows *Himself* to be harvested by God, to be crushed in God's winepress, to have His blood poured out for you. By offering you the wine of His blood, He secures your invitation to that great feast where the wine never runs out, and where gladness never ends.

In this Epiphany, this revelation of Jesus Christ, we see His glory, and what is most glorious about Jesus is that Jesus wants to share His eternal gladness with you. So give glory to Jesus Christ, and be glad!

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*