

Signs and Miracles: The Water into Wine
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On February 3rd, 2019

John 2:1-12

Today, we continue our sermon series on signs and miracles, the one Katie kicked off marvelously last week by talking about the woman with the continuous flow of blood who was healed by Jesus, and her own experience of healing. Today, we shift to the Gospel of John. Here we get a story that is not about a healing, but about how Jesus helped a party continue by turning water into wine. John says that this was the first of Jesus signs. Listen now to this familiar story:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Over in my office, I have a copy of *The Jefferson Bible*. Also known as *the Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, it is Thomas Jefferson's take on Jesus as a teacher and moral exemplar. Jefferson, being a product of the Enlightenment, was a man who valued science and reason and a belief in objective evidence. So, discounting all that ran counter to what he believed was possible, everything that offended his Enlightenment sensibilities, our third President painstakingly combed through the Gospels with a razor, cutting out all of the miracle stories attributed to Jesus and most references to the supernatural, including the resurrection.

When we began this sermon series on signs and miracles last week, I couldn't help but recall Jefferson's efforts, in part because I know that talk of such supernatural wonders provokes skepticism in at least some people like us, and for some really good reasons, not least of them having to do with all too many miracles that were prayed for not coming to pass. A sermon or two on Jesus' miracles is fine, but a whole series? What are we trying to accomplish with this anyway?

Well, to lay my cards on the table, at least part of what we are trying to do is to help us approach the Divine as One who *does* work wonders, who *can* still surprise us, and not only in the physical realm, which is what so many of the miracle stories are about on their face at least. The God Jesus came to embody for us can also make things possible that we thought could never happen in the realm of relationships, in the world of the soul and the psyche. We'll be looking for God's wondrous activity in divinely inspired steps towards new possibilities and in the day-to-day serendipities of life that we may fail to notice or simply write off as coincidences that we might better call God-incidences. But we will hopefully not avoid the hard questions of what happens when prayers aren't answered, when people don't get well.

In the weeks ahead, let me invite you to sit with the words of the late Mary Oliver, from her poem "The World I Live In."

*I have refused to live
locked in the orderly house of
reasons and proofs.
The world I live in and believe in
is wider than that. And anyway,
what's wrong with Maybe?
You wouldn't believe what once
or twice I have seen. I'll just
tell you this:
only if there are angels in your head will you
ever, possibly, see one.¹*

Now that is not a very Jeffersonian approach to life.

Not surprisingly, the miracle of Jesus changing water into wine at Cana in Galilee did not make the cut for Jefferson's Bible. It remains a challenge to those of us who spend at least some of our lives *locked in the orderly house of reasons and proofs*. I think that's most of us actually. But there it stands, right near the beginning of John's Gospel, the first of Jesus' signs in the book.

I think John puts it there for more than one purpose.

One is surely because the metaphor of a wedding banquet is a favorite image that Jesus uses to describe God's kingdom. In the synoptic Gospels, he tells parables about wedding banquets, where people are invited and do not come, and the lame and the halt and the blind are invited in their stead. He talks about wedding banquets where guests need to be wearing the proper garments or they get tossed out and where bridesmaids need to have oil for their lamps for the procession.

He gives instructions about finding your proper place when you go to such a banquet, going not to the head of the table but to the far end, the last seat. And when Jesus is accused of being a glutton and a wine-bibber because he and his disciples are eating and drinking and making merry, Jesus says, "The wedding guests cannot fast when the bridegroom is with them."

For John's Gospel to put the changing of water into wine at a wedding as Jesus' first miracle is to set Jesus' whole ministry in the context of that banquet image of what his parables say that life together in God looks like. It's like a joyous feast, where all are invited, but some are too busy or bothered or resentful to come. It's a feast founded by a man who spoke of God's heart for the poor and outcast, the blind and the lame, the widow and the orphan and called us to embody that sort of love in our lives. It's a love that sees beyond ourselves and reaches out to address the pain and need of others.

But I think John puts this miracle at the front of his gospel for a few other reasons, too. I believe John does it to say that the God we know in Jesus cares about things like wedding feasts and our day-to-day lives. I think John's Gospel also does this to name the truth that just like the literal wine ran out at that party, sometimes the spiritual wine of joy and love and faith runs out in our lives or in the lives of others we know. It happens far too frequently.

I am not sure whether the people who attended the wedding banquet of which John speaks would say that they were *locked in the orderly house of reasons and proofs*. What the text does say is that they had run out of wine. And that at least one person, Mary the mother of Jesus, noticed. We don't know whether the news of the wine shortage had filtered out to the rest of those in attendance, or whether people hadn't yet quite become aware that the wine had stopped flowing, *but Mary noticed*. And she brought that issue to her son, who told her, "*Woman, what does that have to do with you and me? My hour has not yet come.*"

That's troubling on a number of levels, the first of which is that Jesus calls his mother Woman. If I had been Joseph, and I were there, I might have said what I told my daughters when they were younger and spoke in a sassy way to their mother, "Who are you talking to? Then treat her that way."

The commentators say this was a bit of an unusual way to address his mother—Jesus does the same thing at the cross, by the way—but scholars hypothesize that him calling Mary "Woman" was to emphasize that for Jesus, the notion of family went beyond the biological.

The second problem is that Jesus says, "This is not our issue." We, who would like to think the God we know in Jesus cares about our daily problems and others, are a bit scandalized by this. At least I am. So it's worth noting that, at least in this instance, he actually does do something in response.

Then he follows up with, "My Hour has not yet come." I think that's Jesus way of saying, "If I do something like this, if I change water into wine, people will be likely to misunderstand. They'll think of it as a kind of magic act, a parlor trick. It will interfere with their ability to get my larger mission. It was as if Jesus wanted to control the narrative. Are you familiar with that concept? He wanted to control the narrative, because he believed that his hearers would not be able to comprehend the meaning of his miracle until after his hour had come. In John's gospel, Jesus' hour is the hour that he's hanging on a cross. It is only in light of that, that sort of self-giving love, that the transformation of the water into wine can be rightly understood.

Jesus said, "My hour has not yet come." But Mary didn't take no for an answer and she told the servants to do what Jesus told them and they filled the stone jars for purification up with water and when the wine steward took a sip, he said, "You've saved the good wine til last—most everybody serves the good stuff first and then pulls out the Glen Ellyn when everyone is drunk. But you've saved the good wine til now."

Before we go any further, let me add that this is not really a story about alcohol. It's a story about love, and joy, and faith. Sometimes the miracle, and it is a miracle, is that the wine, or the craving for it, gets turned into sparkling water. Sometimes the miracle is that people notice a situation of scarcity and they respond in ways that bring abundance. I've seen that sort of thing happen all the time, where lack or the perception of it, turns into provision, and the only way I can explain it is the spirit and activity of God.

Shin Fujiyama is here. It was great to be reminded that Immanuel was the first place you came to find funding to launch *Students Helping Honduras*, your ministry to the children of Honduras. You saw what was happening to the children of Honduras, you saw the problems of violence and lack of education, and you said, "I have to make a difference." That led to the building of a school, and now 50 schools, and this year, 54 schools, and I wouldn't put it past you or past God for you to realize your dream of getting 1,000 schools built there. Because I believe in a God who sometimes, at least, takes the water and turns it into wine.

Maybe you read in the paper about Candice Payne, the 34 year old Chicago woman who knew about the makeshift tent city for people experiencing homelessness out in the Second City, and how the propane tank that was supplying heat for it blew up. She started a campaign as the temperatures dipped below zero last week to provide hotel rooms for all of those men and women.²

Most of the people who responded to her campaign were under the age of 40. They managed to raise enough money to get 100 individuals experiencing homelessness into hotel rooms until the weather turned. I believe in a God who, sometimes at least, turns water into wine.

I think about John Schell and the FACETS program and the week in, week out commitment he has to move sleeping mats from one church to the next every Sunday through the winter months so that men and women experiencing homelessness might have a place to lay down their heads. His commitment to doing so preceded our involvement here by years. I look at John's work and think of how God continues to transform the water of his baptism into the wine of service.

We had a wedding shower for Billy Kluttz and Steven Langerman here yesterday. As they look forward to their wedding celebration, I think about how much Billy has blessed this community with his gifts and talents, and how he and Steven feel welcomed and loved here, and that we celebrate them and their relationship. What a joy his wedding will be. I believe in a God who *sometimes at least* turns water into wine.

I believe in a God who sometimes turns wine into sparkling water. You know from me sharing back in August when I received my 18 month chip that I am a part of the 12 step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. You know from me sharing last Sunday during celebrations and concerns that I was going to be receiving my two year chip this past week.

I did. I got it several places. I was in Ocean City on a retreat and picked up a chip there. You can't ever get too many chips.

I received one at a meeting that my sponsor came up from Fredericksburg to attend. He made a special trip up to give me my chip.

At that same meeting, another one of my good friends in the program spoke. He talked about how at one point, about seven or eight years into sobriety, he decided it was time for him to go back to the church. He went back to the particular denomination that he'd been a part of and he talked to the priest about his desire to reengage his faith in the church setting.

The priest said, "The Church is not ready for you."

It crushed him. It crushed his spirit.

He turned to another good friend in the program, a man who happened to be a pastor, actually, and he said, "I'm just having a hard time believing that God loves me."

His friend told him, "Here's what I want you to do. I want you to pray and ask God for a sign to prove that God loves you. Don't try to tell God what the sign should be. Just be ready to get it."

My friend said that he received his sign the next day. I still don't know what the sign was, and he didn't share it with us. But after the meeting this week, I pulled out my phone and I texted my friend. I wrote, "I just want you to know that you are a sign from God for me. You are proof that God loves me."

1. Mary Oliver. *Felicity* (New York, Penguin Random House, 2015).

2. Sandra Garcia. *Candice Payne Got 30 Hotel Rooms for Homeless People in Chicago during Severe Cold Snap* (New York Times, 02/02/2019).