

The miracle in Cana

Written roughly 70 years after the crucifixion, John approaches the story of Jesus unlike Matthew, Mark or Luke.



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John does not deal with the genealogy, birth, baptism, temptation or ascension of Jesus. John does not report Jesus' parables, but carefully follows a theme of Jesus' "I Am" teachings and records more details of his death. John carefully puts together Jesus' miracles, calling them "signs" and treating them as unique windows into the true nature of Jesus as Messiah for all the world.

The first "miraculous sign that Jesus did" was in a small village named Cana, less than 10 miles from his home in Nazareth. We can only speculate why Mary took the lead in addressing the shortage of wine as a hint that she was a senior member of the groom's family seeking to protect their honor.

Marriage involved a year of formal engagement, sealed by family agreement, concluded by a wedding ceremony and several days of celebration. In what was often a dismal world for poor people, the brightest moments were the wedding and birth of children. The wedding celebration was costly and usually required the help of an entire family.

There were six stone water jars for drinking and ceremonial washing (v. 6). When guests arrived, their dirty feet were washed, and during the feasting it was required that the hands be washed between every course of the banquet. Those jars held between 20 and 30 gallons of water. More than a social requirement, hospitality was a significant mark of respectability and expression of piety. To run short of wine or food would bring shame on a whole family and be a bad omen for the newlyweds. You can understand why Mary took action and expected her oldest son to solve the problem.

Our English translation of Mary and Jesus' conversation sounds harsh, but Jesus calling his mother "woman" is more a recognition of her position in

the family. Remember also that when Jesus was dying on the cross he spoke with a tenderness when he entrusted Mary's care to the Apostle John (John 19:20). Mary's words to the servants are to the point: "Do whatever he tells you" (v. 5).

Wine is often a symbol of God's blessing in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 32:14 and Genesis 27:28) as well as part of the great messianic banquet when the kingdom of God comes (Isaiah 25:6). The wedding feast is a picture of God's relationship and promise to Israel (Isaiah 54:5-6; Hosea 2:19-20). Revelation 19:9 describes "the wedding banquet of the Lamb."

There is a note of eyewitness humor in this story when the headwaiter in charge of the banquet says to the groom: "Everyone serves the good wine first. They bring out the second-rate wine only when the guests are drinking freely. You kept the best until now!" (v. 10). Jesus' miracle produces about 120-150 gallons of wine or the equivalent of about 750 modern bottles!

But John is not telling this story to get a laugh. John uses this otherwise unremarkable wedding story as an introduction in his unfolding revelation that Jesus is the promised Messiah: "This was the first miraculous sign that Jesus did in Cana of Galilee. He revealed his glory and his disciples believed in him" (v. 11).

John knows the difference between a parable and a real life event. But he takes the actual events and mines them for understandable insights to help us see the wonder and depth of God's love for each of us. This first glimpse of Jesus reminds us that the Savior cares about ordinary people and the possibility of our experiencing a personal relationship with God. This idea had long been buried in the religious traditions and burdensome legalism of first-century Judaism. Until John told it, only a handful of people even knew about the miracle at Cana.

Some scholars see John as using the six water pots as a symbol of the old laws and sacrifices. In Hebrew numerology the number six represents

Formations

January 17, 2016

Scripture: John 2:1-11

something unfinished or incomplete. The real water in those pots was used for cleansing rituals, all of which portrays a religious system that had run its course and the need for us to seek an experience of faith in God. Sacrifice and laws were being replaced with the new wine of forgiveness, new life and joy.

John focuses on the cross more than the other Gospel writers. Jesus came, not just to perform signs and wonders, but also to fulfill his "time" through death and resurrection. Hear Jesus' words to Mary at Cana: "What does this (wedding crisis) have to do with me? My time hasn't come yet" (v. 5). John reminds us this "sign" and all the other miracles are events that point us to the ultimate purpose (time) of Christ coming into our world.

Perhaps we can even see the abundance of wine Jesus created as suggesting the extravagance of God's grace. Those pots held between 120 to 180 gallons, and the original wine supply had been exhausted! That wedding party would not need that much wine. Remember this is not a parable with each detail assigned a specific meaning. But we can begin to see what John witnessed: the grace of Christ is adequate to our greatest need and his love can overwhelm the darkest forces of this world.

The first miracle John records seems almost inconsequential for all its charm. But this first portrayal of Jesus with ordinary people reveals a Savior who cares about us, who celebrates our important milestones and is aware of our simplest needs. We will see Jesus at many dinners, in the markets, along the roadways and on the lakeshore, wherever there are people in need of God's love. The miracle is not the real story. The miracle is that Jesus shows up where we are living!

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmstead enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.