

Seeing the Sign

John 2:1-11
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Gregory I, commonly known as Saint Gregory the Great, was elected Pope toward the end of the 6th century, just 500 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Listen to his quote about Jesus turning water into wine.

“All men wondered to see the water turned into wine. Every day, the earth’s moisture – being drawn into the root of a vine – is turned by the grape into wine, and no man wonders. Full of wonder then are all the things which men never think to wonder at.”¹

Full of wonder ... are all the things which men – and women – never think to wonder at. In today’s New Testament lesson, the Apostle John calls changing water into wine a sign, not a miracle. He calls it Jesus’ first sign, not his first miracle.

If the changing of water into wine is not just a miracle but also a sign, then what can we learn and receive from this sign, from the events of that day, the day Jesus first revealed just a glimpse of the glory and power of his presence?

Let’s start by taking this miracle story down to its most basic elements – water and wine. Why change water into wine as his first miracle? What is that a sign of – aside from maybe the Lord’s Supper, which had not yet been instituted?

Well, water is the most basic element in all the world. It’s the first and most necessary building block of life. Water is what astronomers look for on other planets to decide if life might exist elsewhere in the universe.

And yet for us, water is so ordinary. We take it for granted, don’t we? But not Jesus. Jesus takes what we see as common and ordinary and reveals its hidden blessing, its sacred nature.

The water in those jars at the wedding that day was used, as John says, “for the Jewish rite of purification.” It was used to wash the guests’ hands and feet as they arrived for the wedding.

Wine, on the other hand, was the star of the event, aside from the bride and groom. This is why the chief steward in charge of the banquet exclaims to the bridegroom, “Everyone serves the good wine first, ... but you have kept the good wine until now.” That’s how special wine was back then.

¹ Pope Saint Gregory the Great, quoted in Context, March 1, 1999, 8.

Jesus takes the ordinary – such as water – and transforms it into the extra-ordinary. With Jesus, what we see as common becomes sacred.

So, what does that say about Jesus? What does that signify, as his first sign? It tells us that Jesus came to make the ordinary extra-ordinary, so that he might ease our anxiety, enhance our joy and make all of life a celebration, a wedding banquet, serving the finest wine, from the first to the last.

And yet, is that how your life feels – like the most joyous wedding celebration you've ever experienced, something that just keeps getting better and better? Probably not. Few of us are that ... faithful.

Wait a minute. What does faith have to do with this? Who in this story was faithful, besides Jesus, of course? Well, his mother. John tells us that everyone was panicking because the wine ran out and the night was still young. Everyone was panicking, except Mary.

Mary turns to Jesus and says, "They have no wine." "Woman," says Jesus, "what concern is that to you and to me?"

Here, Jesus pulls his old trick of asking a question of those seeking something from him – "what concern is that to you and to me?"

"What do you want me to do for you?" as he asks elsewhere in the scriptures, (Matthew 20:32), "Do you want to get well?" (John 5:6), "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mark 4:40),

"Why are you talking about having no bread? ... Don't you remember?" (Mark 8:17-18),

"Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'" (Luke 5:23), "Where is your faith?" (Luke 8:25), "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Luke 12:25),

"... Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?" (Luke 18:7), "... When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8),

"Don't you know me, even after I have been among you such a long time?" (John 14:9), "Why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" (John 20:15), and finally, "Do you love me?" (John 21:17).

These are just a few of the questions Jesus asks of those seeking healing and deliverance amid an otherwise indifferent – and often cruel – world.

When Jesus asks his mother, “What concern is that to you and to me?” it’s then that Mary reveals the depth of her faith in Jesus.

She doesn’t even respond to Jesus, but rather, acts on her faith and knowledge of who he is and what he has come to do. As John says, instead of responding to Jesus’ and his trick question, “His mother (says) to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Moms, right? They have a way of cutting through it all. Who else but Mom can get us to do the right thing whether we want to or not.

Hearing Mary’s response, what was Jesus supposed to do – remain silent in the face of someone’s need? No, that’s not in his nature.

So Jesus points to the water-jars and says to the servants, “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.’”

And as John tells us, “When the steward tasted the water that had become wine ..., (he) called the bridegroom” and praised him for serving such fine wine even toward the end of the banquet, making it the most joyous – and sacred event in their lives.

Such is the power of our faith in Jesus. It is in such faith that even the ordinary events of life become extra-ordinary encounters with God, with that which is holy and sacred and miraculous, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

So how do we develop such eyes and ears as to see and hear the miracles all around us? We follow the signs, the signs that guide us to the joy and blessing and miracles of Jesus.

Just as Jesus fills the jars with ordinary water and from them comes the finest, most spirit-filled wine, so he fills our days with the ordinary, and then invites us to join him in making each moment extra-ordinary.

Take for instance the wife who, after her alcoholic husband turned to the Lord, was heard to say, “Huh, now Jesus has changed beer into furniture.” Money spent on beer is now being spent on the family.

And so it is. Jesus can turn the sour into the sweet, bitterness into peace, hatred into love, anger into joy. And all we need to do is see the signs all around us that Jesus is ready to perform a miracle, in our lives, and in our world.

And, by the way, miracles are happening all around us all the time. Some see it, and others don’t.

This is because, as the rabbis used to say, “If a miracle occurs and there’s only one way to explain it, then God had nothing to do with it.” “God does not usually act in such obvious ways. ... If God does something really amazing, some may see it, others will not.”²

The ones who see and enjoy all the miracles of life are those who look at the world through faith – a faith that pulls God closer, a faith that believes God is active in the world, a faith that trusts in God’s larger purpose, even if we don’t understand it, a faith that sees and embraces the power of Jesus to change and transform this world and our lives for the better, all of it to God’s glory.

Do you have such faith, such faith as to join Jesus in taking the ordinary moments of your life and making them extra-ordinary blessings for all to see and celebrate?

Amen.

² Based on Bill Carter’s sermon, “Miracles – and why we miss them,” John 2:1-11, January 17, 2010. billcartersermons.blogspot.com. Retrieved September 19, 2018.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Celebration, joy, hope! These are the gifts you give to us, Jesus. You turn our mourning into dancing, you take our ashes and transform them into beauty. Thank you, Jesus.

Help us to come to you, not only when we are sorrowful, but also when we are celebrating, as we join celebrate with those overcoming illness, welcoming new babies, and otherwise rejoicing in the blessings of the Lord. For you, Lord, desire to rejoice with us; you are the reason we can celebrate. For the sunshine, the rain, the mountains, the seas; for our children, our friends, our homes and the air we breathe – these are only the beginnings of things we have to be so grateful for. Thank you, Jesus!

Thank you for your care and compassion, your comfort and healing touch. We pray your spirit of peace and comfort for those going through the twilight years of their lives, as they draw closer to the life to come. We pray your spirit of healing and wellness upon those dealing with injury and illness. And for us, O God, we ask that you would nourish us with an ever-growing and maturing faith. Give our lives an exciting sense of your presence, that we may worship you confidently and enthusiastically, in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.