

John 2: 1-11 Sign or Miracle

The gospel of John resembles Mark's in a couple of ways. There is no effort to explain how Jesus is the Son of God. Mark opens by telling us that what he has to say is the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. An announcement of fact. John opens by saying that the Word was with God in the beginning which echoes the first verse of Genesis. In fact it was the word spoken which created the world and all that is in it, the Word was with God and was God. Again an announcement of fact. There is no birth narrative in either. There is not explanation of how God took on flesh. There is no placing of Jesus within the genealogical record of Israelite history. Jesus is introduced in both as an adult just at the start of his ministry. Both Mark and John begin telling their story at the time of Jesus' baptism, although the details about that baptism vary. Although Mark is the shortest gospel account, John is not very much longer. But despite those common points, John's gospel tells the story of Jesus in an entirely different manner. Even the manner of calling the disciples appears different. It is not the same sets of brothers and there is no mention of their previous occupation before being called. According to John's gospel, John the Baptist's role is to testify to who Jesus is. He is named but not called the baptizer. In this gospel John not only declares that he is subordinate to Jesus, but calls him the Lamb of God because he saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus. The first of Jesus' disciples began as followers of John, but now go after Jesus questioning him. Jesus' response is to issue an invitation for them to "come and see." The invitation is to come with Jesus and see if what they are looking for can be found in him. Jesus tells them they will see great things. The image of seeing is very important to understanding John's message for us. It is always significant in the gospel narrative what the first event of Jesus' public ministry is. In Mark, it is the exorcism of a demon; in Matthew it is the Sermon on the Mount; in Luke it is sermon in Nazareth on the Sabbath. Each of these events is typical of the portrayal of Jesus in that gospel account. Our text this morning follows Jesus' invitation and promise to these first disciples. It describes a family and community event held in the village of Cana. For John this story tells us something significant about Jesus and his ministry. As Jesus and his group leave the wedding John clearly states that this is the first sign revealing Jesus' glory. So let's walk through what the story tells us. John begins by telling us Jesus and his disciples are invited to a wedding. The couple is not named and in fact do not personally appear in the story. We are not told of any particular relationship which Jesus has to them. Jesus comes to the wedding to honor the community and human relationships. This gives us a glimpse of the life Jesus lived before he began his ministry. He was living in a community and participating in the normal activities of that community. When he and his disciples arrive we are told that Jesus' mother is also there. And in the last verse of this passage we are told that his brothers as well as his mother and disciples left Cana with him for Capernaum. The scene John is drawing is of a family occasion where friends and families are gathered in celebration. At that time the joining of two families called for a celebration which would last for a week. It was a time of community joy and celebration of God's blessings to the community. Some interpreters indicate that the opening verse tells us that the celebration has lasted for three days already. Jesus' mother comes to him and informs him that a major social catastrophe is looming. The bridal couple is about to be embarrassed because the wine has run out and the party is not yet over. If this were to happen this wedding would be forever remembered in the community for the failure of

the bridegroom to provide for his guests, his hospitality would be lacking which would have been a symbol of the lack of God's blessings. Although not explicitly stated it seems obvious that Jesus' mother expects her son to do something to avert this problem. Jesus' response seems rather abrupt and rude. "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." Jesus has put distance between himself and his mother by calling her "Woman." Jesus' mother is never given a name in John's gospel account. Jesus has not come to this wedding with the intention of doing anything which would be a revelation of his mission—his hour is not yet come. The timing is not right for the demonstration of the agenda God has given him. Evidently his mother senses that although Jesus considers this outside of his God given agenda, he will solve the situation. She understands that he will show care and concern. She is confident that Jesus will act upon her request. So she instructs the servants to do what he tells them and evidently goes back to socializing with the rest of the wedding party. Next we are told that nearby there are six stone water jars used for the Jewish rites of purification. Our texts describes them as holding 20 to 30 gallons, the Greek states two or three measures, but based upon archeological evidence the 20-30 gallons each would have been about the capacity of such jars. These jars normally contained not drinking water, but water used for washing. That they were stone meant that they did not transmit impurity. The servants must have wondered at Jesus' instructions. The need for the party was wine, but he told them to fill the jars to the brim with water. It would not have made sense to them that this was going to help the situation at all. Once the jars are filled he tells the servants to draw some out and take it to the chief steward. There is no description that Jesus actually did anything. Again, the servants obey his instructions. You have to wonder at what point do the servants realize the jars no longer contain water but are full of wine? The chief steward when he tastes what the servants have brought him does not know the history of this cup's content. He is unaware of what Jesus has done. The chief steward then goes to the bridegroom and says: "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." The steward has wrongly, but naturally, assumed that the bridegroom has kept the best for last. Again, you might wonder what the bridegroom thought as he knows nothing of what has happened. The guests also are unaware as the party continues. From this there are several points to make: first, this changing of water to wine, although done at a public affair with most of the people of the town and surrounding countryside present—only the servants and disciples witnessed the event. The bridegroom and the chief steward are not aware of what has happened. Jesus has provided care for the bridegroom showing God's grace in the ordinary, normal happenings of human life. By providing 6 large stone jars full to the brim with wine, Jesus has provided for the party so extravagantly and abundantly that the party could have lasted across weeks instead of just days. This provision is like God's grace as the couple received more wine, joy and blessings than they could have imagined or deserved through Jesus' actions. Not only was the wine more plentiful than could have been imagined, it was a better vintage. Again, this is symbolic of God's grace to us. Some interpretations have used this narrative as another theological point. If Jesus, and the salvation he brings, is symbolized by the wine, then the story says that miraculously out of the water of purification of the Jewish rites of purification the wine of Jesus and the gospel comes. That is certainly true as Jesus who is God incarnate, with the flesh belonging to a Jewish man, brings salvation. But I think it is also important to note that within

John's gospel, the deeds which Jesus does are not called miracles but signs. According to Webster's dictionary the definition of a miracle is that it is an event which apparently contradicts known scientific laws and is therefore caused by supernatural forces. The changing of water into wine as described by John would definitely fall into this category. It would not require a great deal of effort on the part of Jesus through whom the world was created to change the water into wine or anything else. But John tells us this: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs." The dictionary tells us that a sign is something that indicates a fact or gives information. John is telling us that we need to focus not on the miraculous, but on the one who performed the act. What is important about the signs is not what happens, but the one who made something happen. What is important is what the signs tell us about the nature of the one who has entered into history and human community. In the wedding at Cana, Jesus performs a quite miracle with few witnesses. Yet what happened showed his care for those he lived among and that what he did was so extravagant that not only was the need met, but there was abundance in the gift. Sometimes when we speak of grace it is hard to describe it. We say that it is a gift from God, which is very true. But sometimes we fail to understand just how abundant, how extravagant the gift is because like the vast amount of wine in those jars—it is more than we can imagine—and certainly more than we deserve. Thanks be to God.