

Scripture Readings for January 16, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

¹2 Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. ³Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

⁷Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

John 2:1-11

²On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, ²and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

⁴"Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come." ⁵His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

⁶Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. ⁸Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, ⁹and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside ¹⁰and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

¹¹What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Sermon: “God’s Gracious Extravagance”

What’s your response when you hear of the dramatic miracle at the wedding in Cana?¹ Some see it as a fable,² a fabrication because we know from our daily experience that turning water into wine is physically impossible. They are therefore *embarrassed* by it. In response, I am sure miraculous events were as shocking in the 1st century as they are to us today.³ The essence of *any* miracle is that it shatters conventional explanations and expectations. I therefore think it’s unwise to merely dismiss miracle accounts or try and explain them away; instead, we are to critically examine what they might reveal about reality. Others wonder what this story says about God’s priorities if he miraculously provides 600 liters of excellent wine just to rescue a social disaster but doesn’t do more to alleviate the tremendous sufferings in the world. Understandably, they are therefore *offended* by this account. However, we need to be mindful of the *author’s* agenda⁴ and *not* fault him for *not* addressing *our* questions and concerns, important though they are.⁵ Still others wonder at what aspects of the story *mean*. Why did Jesus say to his mother, “My hour has not yet come”?⁶ What’s the significance of the stone pots?⁷ And why does John consider this miracle as a *sign*?⁸ They are therefore *puzzled* by it. And it’s also reasonable to ask: What might all this mean for us today?

Today’s brief exploration of this story has to begin in the previous chapter. It’s there that John claims Jesus is the creative, divine Word made flesh.⁹ For John, then, Jesus is (at least) the *co-creator* of all that is and, in becoming human, and he is uniquely and truthfully revealing God’s gracious nature to us all.¹⁰ God’s very *presence* - or “glory,” to use the religious term - is evident in Jesus and we have *witnessed* it, proclaims John.¹¹ Later in the chapter, John reports the calling of the first disciples, including Nathaniel - who came from Cana,¹² which is about 10 miles north of Nazareth. Jesus apparently surprises Nathaniel with what he already knows about him.¹³ Jesus responds to Nathaniel’s shock with, “You will see *greater* things than these.”¹⁴ And John’s then swiftly moves to this account of the wedding

¹ John 2:1-11; this account is only found in John.

² Akin to Greco-Roman tales.

³ Regardless of the differences in worldviews, there is no reason to think they were not naïvely accepting of miracles – including the resurrection.

⁴ A careful study of the whole Gospel will reveal his apparent priorities (e.g., John 20:3-31).

⁵ That is the responsibility of theologians who attempt to systematize Christian framework(s) in light of the whole Bible, church history, philosophy, science, etc.

⁶ John 2:4b.

⁷ John 2: 6.

⁸ John 2:11.

⁹ John 1:1-3, 14. See also: <https://securereservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Truth-is-Stranger-than-Fiction.pdf> .

¹⁰ John 1:16-18. “Grace and truth” are repeated in John 1:14, 17.

¹¹ John 1:14. See also Reddish, *The Jesus I Didn’t Know I Didn’t Know* (Wipf & Stock, 2021), chapter 7.

¹² See John 21:1.

¹³ This foreknowledge or divinely revealed insight is a sign Jesus is at least a prophet. (John 1 has *many* titles of Jesus, including Messiah. Given the high Christology of the prologue, John may see Jesus as having a degree of omniscience; there are indications of this special ability throughout the Gospel.)

¹⁴ John 1:50. See also 1:51.

of Cana with the obvious implication that the miracle Jesus does there is one of those “greater things” which further reveals God’s presence or glory.¹⁵ In other words, the turning of water into wine is a *sign* that reveals *who* Jesus is.¹⁶ In fact, scholars identify *seven* such special signs in this Gospel, hence this story begins an ongoing theme in John.¹⁷

Armed with that background information, let’s now consider the wedding story. The initial details are sparse. It’s plausible the bride and groom were either relatives or close friends of Mary, Jesus, and his disciples, since they were invited to attend.¹⁸ We all, despite the best wedding planning, have stories of something that didn’t go according to plan! (I certainly do.) In this case, they ran out of wine and that would have been perceived as an insult to the guests and a source of great shame for years to come for the host.¹⁹ For some reason Mary gets involved and she says to Jesus, “They have no wine left.” His response makes it clear that her words carried an implied request for him to do something about it. He says, “Woman, why are you saying this to me?”²⁰ The use of “woman” here sounds harsh to the modern ear, but it was a common form of speech to address a woman and no slight is intended.²¹ Even so, it is unusual for a person to refer to their own mother in that way. Perhaps it suggests Jesus is creating some “distance,” as it were, between himself and his mother.²² This is consistent with what he says next, “My hour has not yet come.”²³ Jesus is on *God’s* mission and working to a divine timetable; Jesus implies that now is *not* the time to publicly proclaim he’s the Messiah. Mary simply tells the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”²⁴ It would appear Mary still remains convinced Jesus can do something about the lack of wine but concedes that the initiative lies with him. She therefore trusts in Jesus’ ability to act but will not curtail his freedom.

We are then provided a surprising amount of detail as to what happens next: “Now there were six stone water jars there for Jewish ceremonial washing, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus told the servants, ‘Fill the water jars with water,’ and so they filled them to the brim.”²⁵ Now stone jars, rather than pottery, were used for ritual cleansing to satisfy the mosaic law.²⁶ Symbolically then, the new wine

¹⁵ See John 2:11. (In John 2:1 there is mention of the “third” day; see also John 29, 35, 43. These “days” link with John 1:1 which starts “In the beginning. . .” and alludes to Gen 1:1. This third day is, then, completes the seven days and the creative Word is still powerfully active in works of the new creation. Some scholars also see an allusion to the day of resurrection.)

¹⁶ Some scholars also see this miracle as pointing to Jesus as the provider of living water (John 4:10-15).

¹⁷ That being the case, this miracle is pointing to one of a series of dramatic revelations of God’s presence in the person of Jesus and, consequently, it completely misses John’s point to suggest that God doesn’t really care about human suffering.

¹⁸ John 2:1-2. Given Mary’s sense of obligation when the wine ran out, a *relative* is likely. (John is not interested in such details.) Curiously, John never mentions Mary by name in the Gospel, only as “the mother of Jesus” (John 2:1,3,5,12; 19:25).

¹⁹ And the bride and groom might regard it as being bad luck on their married life!

²⁰ John 2:4.

²¹ See also Matt 15:28; Luke 22:57; John 4:21.

²² See also Mark 3: 31-34.

²³ John 2:4. The reference to time – “hour” - is a key theme: John 2:4; 4:21,23; 5:25,28,29; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23,27; 13:1; 16:25; 17:1. This refers to eschatological fulfillment and, in particular, Christ’s glorification in his death, resurrection, and ascension.

²⁴ John 2:5. See also Gen 41:55, where Pharaoh expresses unconditional confidence in Joseph’s ability to resolve the famine situation. This subtle but pertinent link is, I believe, relevant.

²⁵ John 2:6-7. Depending on whether the stone pot was either 80 or 120 liters, the total was 480-720 liters of water/wine.

²⁶ See Lev 11:33. Note: after this miracle in Cana, Jesus cleanses the temple (John 2:12-22), another sign of *reform*.

is created in old jars associated with the Jewish purification rites, meaning that the old religious forms are now given a joyous fresh expression.²⁷ Existing empty vessels were therefore filled with a new and gracious gift.²⁸

The rest of the story is familiar. Jesus tells a servant to draw some liquid out of the stone jar and he takes it to the master of ceremonies, who has no knowledge of the behind-the-scenes drama. The chief steward then tastes it and proclaims to the bridegroom that he's *not* following convention but has saved the *good* wine until now!²⁹ The MC unknowingly verifies that a miracle has occurred, the water has become excellent *quality* wine. Although the chief steward is praising the bridegroom, we – along with the servants – know that the real benefactor is Jesus.³⁰ But there is more: the *quantity* of wine is excessively lavish, somewhere between 500 and 700 liters. This superabundance reminds us of later the feeding of the 5000 from five loaves and two fish, with twelve baskets full of leftovers!³¹ Moreover, the Old Testament prophets Amos and Joel spoke of the mountains literally dripping with wine “in that day,”³² the implication being that God's promised day of salvation has arrived because Jesus, who John earlier describes as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,”³³ is now here.³⁴

John, then, is not presenting the miracle for us to merely be wowed by it. The significance of this extraordinary story is not so much *what* happens but *who* and *why*. The miracle points *to* Jesus; the reality of God's presence or God's glory³⁵ is being wonderfully revealed in these creative acts. As I mentioned earlier, this is one of seven such tangible signs in John's Gospel, all defying conventional logic and wisdom, that the writer presents so we can recognize *who* Jesus is.³⁶ It's another epiphany! And the response? Some will believe and others will reject the sign.

In our other New Testament reading, Paul writes about the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to the church; I have spoken about this topic before.³⁷ And this reminds me of Luke's description of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.³⁸ There, God lavishly gave his Spirit to *all* present in the room and later Peter preaches his first sermon to explain to all the onlookers what is going on, since they thought the

²⁷ See also Mark 2: 21-22.

²⁸ See John 1:17. Something joyously new is being created in the midst of the Jewish traditions.

²⁹ John 2:8-10. The servants know the source of the wine and they function as witnesses to the transformation.

³⁰ The symbolism that Jesus is the real (eschatological) bridegroom is made clear in John 3:27-36, esp. 29.

³¹ John 6:1-14. (See also Matt 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:12-17.)

³² See Amos 9: 13; Joel 3: 18.

³³ John 1:29.

³⁴ That all this occurs at a wedding celebration is not insignificant, it suggests the eschatological wedding feast has begun; see also Rev 19:7-10.

³⁵ See also Exod 24:15-18; 34:29-35; 40:34-38; Heb 1:1-3. (Note, John has no Transfiguration account as do the synoptic Gospels.)

³⁶ See John 7: 27-28; 8:14; 9:9-30; 20:30-31.

³⁷ See <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Concerning-Spiritual-Things.pdf> ; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/God%E2%80%99s-Spirit-is-Given-Lavishly-to-His-People.pdf> .

³⁸ See Acts 2 and <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/What-Does-This-Mean.pdf> .

followers of Jesus were drunk!³⁹ To explain that apparent excess, Peter cites the prophet Joel, who writes: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”⁴⁰ The language of “pouring out” the Spirit also conjures the image of superabundance. God’s Spirit is not just for the prophets, priests, and kings of the Old Testament, but now for men, women, Jews, non-Jews, servants, and masters – everyone! All this points to the age that Jesus introduced at the wedding of Cana as continuing in the Spirit-filled life of the church, one that will come to a completion at the great wedding banquet of the Lamb.⁴¹ We need to appreciate this larger canvas for overall context, after which we can discover our role within it.

How might this bizarre miracle account be relevant for us today? We need to be careful here as we will undermine John’s agenda if we merely moralize the story or reduce it to platitudes. Nevertheless, a few observations might prove helpful.

First, observe that Jesus wasn’t an honored guest at this wedding; in fact, nobody looked for Jesus until the wine was all gone. That can also be true for us today, we come to Jesus as a last resort. Before the wine ran out, that old wine was still wine even if it wasn’t of great quality. And sometimes it’s the old rituals or familiar patterns that can get in the way of recognizing what the Holy Spirit has for us today. Those old rules and habits are sufficiently satisfying to keep us from seeking Jesus and what he has to offer, and we settle for a dry religion of old wine. It’s worth pausing to taste what we are drinking today, and ask, “Is this the best God has to offer? Where’s that vision of extravagance abundance that Joel and Amos spoke about?” Having recognized any dissatisfaction and disappointment, what will we do?

My second point is that in this crisis, Mary goes to Jesus. She does not know *how* Jesus will meet the need, or *what* he will require in order to achieve it, or *when* he will act. The critical issue for Mary is not *what*, *when*, *where*, or *how*, rather her calmness is the result of her knowing *who*. She knows her son and she appears to be neither upset nor unnerved by his response. She simply says to the servants, “Do whatever he asks.” When we come to Jesus for help, do we then proceed to tell him *what* he needs to do to fix things and *how* to go about it – and to do it *immediately*!? That doesn’t sound like *trust* to me. I suggest we need to come to Jesus mindful of *who* it is we are addressing; he’s the co-creator of all that is and therefore he might surprise us with his creative response. Do we *know* Jesus? And do we therefore trust Jesus to act without telling him precisely what to do?

Third, if you think about it, what happens next makes no obvious sense, and that’s when faith is important.⁴² The problem is a lack of *wine*, Jesus commands the servants to fill the jars with *water*. The

³⁹ Acts 2:1-4, 12-13, 15.

⁴⁰ Acts 2:16-21, Joel 2:28-32 (Note how Luke adapts Joel to suit his purposes!)

⁴¹ Rev 19:6-9. Matthew also gives two parables with a wedding theme: Matt 22:1-14; 25:1-13.

⁴² In this case, Jesus gave a clear instruction and so *obedience* was also called for.

route that Jesus takes to address the need is *not* the one we would expect. Just as in the later story of the loaves and the fishes, Jesus takes what is mundanely available and makes something extraordinary out of it. The wine is not magically conjured up out of nothing! Moreover, in both situations the miracle happens as a result of human action and obedience *in partnership* with Jesus. When we come to Jesus for help, these two stories suggest we are not to passively wait and do nothing, but to act in faith with what we have. We bring our resources, talents, and gifts to Jesus and then act appropriately - and who knows what unforeseeable things might materialize as a consequence! In these miracles of abundant provision of wine and food, the outcome exceeds everyone's expectations both in quantity and quality. Consequently, in these stories, God's presence and grace is revealed when we act in obedience or in faith.⁴³ That being the case, are passively waiting or actively doing?

Finally, I suggest that it's part of God's nature is to *bless* and that results in increased joy. It's no accident that this miracle happens in the context of a wedding celebration! God didn't *cause* the wine to run out and I don't believe God sends us troubles to test us or is the source of injustice and suffering. Regardless, we can't obviously ignore or be complacent about such things, but we can work to increase someone's joy in every life circumstance. And in the process, let's expect God to graciously bless those efforts as we partner with him. Amen. Let us pray.

⁴³ In the case of the wine at Cana, it was the servants who witnessed this quiet, behind-the-scenes miracle, even if its effects were beneficial to the whole wedding party.