

John 2:1-11

For the author of John's gospel, whenever Jesus performs a miracle, it's a "sign." In the synoptic gospels, he does miracles to help people, and that's all. But John calls them signs. That is, they have a revelatory or pedagogical function: they're meant to tell us something important about the messiah and the messianic age. The changing of water to wine at the wedding at Cana is Jesus' first "sign" in John, so the central question has to be, What does this establish about the messiah and the messianic age being inaugurated?

John loves his symbols and his numbers, and it's pretty easy to surmise that "the third day" is a reference ahead to resurrection. Wedding feasts are a symbol of the feast of the kingdom in the synoptic gospels, and there is something about a festival in which the whole community gathers to celebrate the birth of a new family, that evokes a sense of completion *and* possibility *and* shalom, that quality of peace and plenty. So John has placed Jesus and his very newly-enlisted disciples in the midst of a village celebration that might be a foretaste of the kingdom, and then we become aware of an undercurrent of alarm: the wine is giving out.

The drama around this crisis is interestingly understated. Mary has this private conversation with Jesus in which she doesn't exactly ask him to do something, but he infers that she wants something and pushes back, and then she tells the servants to follow his instructions, like she knows he *will* do something and maybe she doesn't know what it is. There's a lot unspoken here. But the upshot is that after the servants have filled the gigantic jars with water, that water becomes delicious, high-quality wine. And the steward has a private conversation with the groom about how good it is. Meanwhile, the party seems to be going on all around, without general awareness that the wine almost ran out, and without general

awareness that a miracle has been performed right under their noses. If this is a sign, revealing Jesus' glory, it's a pretty quiet sign. Only the servants and the group around Jesus have noticed.

Nothing has changed, but everything has changed, and nobody knows it. Isn't that interesting?

Last week when we were in Phoenix we went to the Heard Museum, which is a museum for the presentation, interpretation and advancement of American Indian art, emphasizing its intersection with broader artistic and cultural themes.ⁱ They have an exhibition called "Away From Home," which documents the experiences of indigenous children who were taken from their families to be educated at the Indian School in Phoenix. It's not a happy exhibit, as you can imagine. The whole intention of the Indian schools was to eradicate the children's culture and make them Euro-American, and the children suffered emotionally, physically, and spiritually from their dislocation. However, as one of the graduates said:

"[Boarding schools] were started to stamp out the Indian from the Indian, you know, make us all into white people, and you know, it didn't work. Actually ... it was the exact opposite: it made us stronger as Indian People. It made us more aware of and more proud of who we were."
-Ruthe Blalock Jones (Delaware/Shawnee/Peoria)ⁱⁱ

That's not to minimize the trauma and damage that the Indian schools caused; it's just to point out another place where God was at work, preserving candle flames in the darkness. But I was particularly struck by one tiny story of survival, maybe along the lines of Jesus' "sign" at Cana: apparently one homesick Navajo boy at the Phoenix Indian school managed to collect the tassels of corn plants growing on campus, and shook out the yellow pollen so that he could pray. Without any elders to guide him, he still found what he needed for worship, and worshiped. Nothing had changed, but everything had changed. Still at the Indian School, but

he could pray here too.

I heard a funny story about a congregation—I don't know what denomination, but they were one of the very well-behaved ones—who were having a special worship service of rejoicing and jubilation. The worship planners knew that nobody would be comfortable with spontaneous dancing or hooting and hollering, but they wanted something special and joyous, so they gave everybody a helium balloon and told them whenever they thought it was appropriate, they should just let that balloon go soaring up to the ceiling. When the service was over, about a third of the congregation were still holding on to their balloons. I can relate to this, because I'm loath to waste a good balloon on a pretty happy moment when, who knows, there might be a *more* joyous moment coming up ahead. I don't think they'd had a joyless time; I think they were just budgeting their balloons because you only got one balloon and you didn't want to waste it on the wrong moment. It's really hard to pick your time. And I think that's part of John's teaching about the coming of the messianic age, too: when Jesus says, "My hour has not yet come," and then goes and does a Kingdom thing two minutes later, it looks to me like he's realized that it's *always* time to enact the kingdom. The Kingdom is highly improvisational; there's no "right" or wrong moment, and you don't wait for the heavens to open before you enact it.

So, Jesus' first "sign" is not witnessed by many people, and it's done spontaneously, in response to a prompt from his mother. Here's another layer: when Moses led the people of Israel through the wilderness, the glory of the Lord traveled with them. The text indicates that the glory of the Lord was manifest in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, but the medieval commentator Rashi, the most famous and respected commentator on Jewish sacred

texts, said that the glory of the Lord was manifest in the *manna*. His point was that the glory wasn't showy or splendid, but inhered in something that even the travelers didn't actually think much of—bland, monotonous, just enough sustenance. You can't eat a pillar of fire, however splendid it looks, but manna keeps you going, so that's where Rashi sees the glory of the Lord. If Jesus "revealed his glory" at Cana by quietly keeping the wine topped up, and only the servants saw, it was not the first time that the glory of the Lord was revealed in something very ordinary and ground-level.

Taken as a whole, this story says to me that Jesus set a pattern as he inaugurated the messianic age: he did it spontaneously, when the opportunity presented itself, even if he needed a nudge to realize that now was as good a time as any; and he did it at an everyday level, augmenting the hospitality and joyousness of the occasion without drawing attention to himself, like when you pay for the person behind you at the coffee shop and then you leave before they realize what you did. AND everything changed, even though nothing had changed. The kingdom, once inaugurated by Jesus, continues in ordinary places when we have the eyes to see it. Just as there was sacred yellow corn pollen on the very campus of the Indian School, so a child could worship unseen, right under the noses of hostile authorities, so there is the stuff of hospitality and generosity wherever we are, and it is the potentiality of the kingdom just waiting for us to realize that the moment is now.

Desmond Tutu of blessed memory, whom we have not had a chance to mourn since he died on Christmas Eve, recalled an ordinary gesture that happened when he was twelve, and what it meant to him: "One day I was standing in the street with my mother when a white man in a priest's clothing walked past. As he passed us he took off his hat to my mother. I couldn't

believe my eyes – a white man who greeted a black working class woman!”ⁱⁱⁱ As an adult, he famously said, “Your ordinary acts of love and hope [like the priest’s gesture of courtesy to his mother] point to the extraordinary promise that every human life is of inestimable value.” And of course through his actions but also through his light and gracious way of being, he uncovered the kingdom of God wherever he went. That’s what I think the wedding at Cana points to: the kingdom is here; the messianic age is upon us, and with generosity and graciousness, we also make it manifest.

God of revelation,

You made your son known at a wedding, a public celebration of love. Celebrate love with us by revealing your realm in our midst. Amen.

ⁱ <https://heard.org/>

ⁱⁱ <https://heard.org/boardingschool/reforms-and-changes/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://news.yahoo.com/apartheid-fighter-desmond-tutu-died-165614986.html>