

The First Sign: The Abundant Joy of Jesus

John 2:1-11

The Gospel According to John

Series #9

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in John chapter 1, the Gospel of John, chapter 1.

If you looked up the word joy in the dictionary you would find it defined as a state of happiness or as “the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.”¹ If you were to look for a definition of joy in a pictures only dictionary you might find pictures of a sweet puppy or kitten, or of small children playing nicely together, or of a picturesque vacation spot, or a lovely sunset. If you were asked to draw a picture which defined joy for you, you might draw your favorite person or maybe even your favorite activity or food or experience.

But one of the most universally accepted pictures of pure joy that is shared by a community of people is a wedding! Weddings are the culmination of months of planning which burst onto the scene with an explosion of celebration and joy. And this has always been true for humanity in almost every culture. The marriage ceremony and surrounding celebration are universally occasions of great joy.

And so, it is with no little interest that we find in John 2 Jesus’ first public ministry engagement happening at a wedding. You will see that the word “joy” is not used in the text, but I hope to prove to you this morning that this is what is the central reality at stake. The wedding Jesus attends is on the cusp of having all of the joy sucked out of it as it runs out of wine, and Jesus performs his first miraculous sign by turning an exorbitant amount of water into wine which proves to be better than any wine they had already drunk at the wedding feast. Thus, he restores joy to the occasion, but there is much more going on than the temporary joy of this wedding. Jesus is here making known that true and lasting and eternal joy is found through faith in Him.

So, before we read the text this morning, I wonder, how is your joy? And maybe the better question is, what is the well out of which you send your bucket down for more joy? In this dry and thirsty land of a sin-cursed world we are constantly thirsting for satisfaction and the joy it brings. And the world, the flesh, and the devil all evangelize your soul all day every day about other sources of joy. They beckon you to experiences and entertainment and fulfillment of desires and new possessions – all with the promise of satisfied joy. But eventually every one of those balloons deflates and you are left with depleted joy once again. So, I ask you, where does your joy come from? Let’s read John 2, the first 11 verses.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/joy>

When we last considered Jesus, we found him in the middle of his first week of public ministry. The week started with John the Baptist declaring that he was just a voice in the wilderness, and that there was one coming after him that he was not worthy to even untie his sandal strap. Then he saw Jesus and he declared – The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Two of John's disciples immediately followed Jesus – Andrew and most likely, John, the author of this Gospel account. This led to a series of days in which Jesus called more unto himself to follow after him. By the time we get to chapter 2 we know the names of Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, Nathanael, and John. On the third day, after he had called Nathanael, we find Jesus and his disciples in the small town of Cana of Galilee for a wedding. This was a small town in the hills of Galilee that was about 9 miles north of Nazareth, the town where Jesus grew up. And the wedding was apparently someone related to Jesus, or at least a good family friend. We know this because Mary was already there, and Jesus was also invited with his disciples. And Mary seems to have a particular interest in the affairs of the wedding feast, so she probably has some sort of responsibility in helping host the celebration. In other words, this is a very personal scene that we come upon here. This is not some random wedding that Jesus happens upon in his travels. Jesus is intentionally taking himself and his disciples into the normal routine and rhythm of life as he launches his very public ministry. Notice how different this is from John the Baptist. Johnny B was out in the wilderness preaching to crowds who came out to him. It was a direct and confrontational ministry, but it was also pretty clear cut and clean. But Jesus is not a voice in the wilderness, he is the incarnate Word who has come to save his people from their sins. His ministry is to be found in and among the people. In this way he will bring grace and truth to the everyday common person. And he starts by going to a wedding.

And a wedding in those days was quite different from how we do it today. The bridegroom and his friends would go to the bride's house and bring her and her attendants to the bridegroom's house where there was a wonderful celebration prepared, which could last for up to a week. The bridegroom was responsible to pay for all of the festivities, and it was a public display of his fitness to provide for his new wife – by how he provided for the wedding celebration.

Well, that sets up the major problem at this wedding feast doesn't it? You already know what happens – they run out of wine – which was a key element in their celebration. There is really no reason to think of this as anything other than what it is – fermented juice from grapes – also known as wine. The process of fermentation was crucial for their well-being and general health in those days. They didn't have the refrigeration we have, and they therefore didn't have the options of beverages we enjoy. So, wine was a common drink in the Jewish household. But their wine was also quite different from our wine. It was heavily diluted by mixing it with water. It could still get someone drunk, but it would take quite a bit more of it than our wine of today. In fact, our wine of today is what is called strong drink in the Scriptures – and it is not talked about in a positive light. But the normal wine is presented in the Old Testament as that which brings joy to the heart of man. The psalmist in Psalm 104:15 gives praise to God for giving the produce of the earth from which they make wine which gladdens their heart. In Judges 9:13, Jotham speaks in a parable to the leaders of Shechem and he says of the vine that it would not go and reign over all the trees because it doesn't want to leave its position of giving wine which cheers God and man. If you do a search in your Bible on wine you will find many examples of it being abused and causing trouble, but you will also find that it is associated with the bounty of

God's provision for his people and an evidence of their joy in Him – when it is rightly enjoyed. And at a wedding feast was one of the customary times in this culture that the best wine was enjoyed for the sake of rejoicing in a new marriage being formed. Wine was the key element of their public celebration at the feast. And it has run out!

And you have to ask yourself, why does Jesus care? This has often been described as the luxury miracle of Jesus. This miraculous work doesn't heal a sin-ravaged body or cast out a demon or raise the dead back to life – so why does Jesus do it at all? And, more than that, why is this Jesus' first sign? This is not an accident you know. The writer of this Gospel has thousands of miracles to pick from, and he chooses 7 to detail for us in this book. He chooses to call them signs because they point to something greater than the event. And this is how John writes his Gospel. He is always looking for the deeper spiritual angle on everything in the life of Christ. Sometimes he attaches some teaching from Jesus to help explain the deeper significance of the sign. But this first one is just there – no explanation – apparently because there wasn't one needed. So, is this a superfluous waste of Jesus' divine power. Or is there more going on here? Well, there is obviously more going on here. This miraculous sign of Jesus points to a joy that can only be fully found in him. He arrives on this scene and does this miracle to make the point that He has come to bring the joy of grace upon grace – grace overflowing and super-abounding – just like these water jars. To show you this is true let me walk you through the text by making 4 truth statements to you about joy. The first is that temporal joy runs out.

I. Temporal Joy Runs Out – vs. 1-3

- a. The mother of Jesus is involved in some aspect of overseeing the feast, and apparently, she is one of the first ones to find out that the wine is gone. In other words, the celebration is about to grind to a screeching halt once everyone realizes that there is nothing left to drink. There is a major crisis for the bride and groom looming on the very near horizon. There is actually extra-biblical accounts dated to around this time where people from the community would bring a lawsuit against a bridegroom for his faulty planning and carrying out of a successful wedding feast. It's hard to overstate how big of a deal this is.
- b. If they run out of wine and the feast comes to an abrupt and unhappy end, the community will forever remember this couple as the ones who were incompetent and unprepared.
- c. The text doesn't tell us why they ran out of wine. Maybe more people came than they expected, or maybe some folks drank more than they should have. Most likely it is an indication of the poverty of the bridegroom. He did what he could, but he couldn't afford to do more. And here they are, the wine is gone, and the joy of the celebration is about to go out with it.
- d. And this is a universal truth about things which bring us joy in this temporal life – they always run out. The party always comes to an end and the fun always stops and the celebration finally gets the lights turned off on it. Everything you look to in your life to bring you happiness and joy will run out. Your family is the most solid of all of those things we often turn to in this world to give us joy – but even they will not live forever. Temporal joy always runs out. And when it does, we are confronted afresh with our need for some greater joy. This is the normal

human experience. What Jesus teaches us here is that when this happens, this provides a great opportunity for us to seek a longer lasting joy – one that he alone can provide. So, what is running out in your life? What joy fountain is barely trickling water anymore? You know, it's not on accident that Jesus does this at a wedding. Not only is it a celebration of joy, but marriages often have a season after the wedding where the honeymoon wears off and the joy of marriage gets zapped by the reality of living with another sinner. Jesus says to us, when it all runs out, I have something far greater.

II. Human Effort Never Refills Joy – vs. 4-5

- a. The next truth is seen in Jesus' interaction with his own mother – and that truth is that human effort never refills joy. This is what we see happening in Mary. It is a mix of faith and reliance on her own devices, and thankfully, faith wins the day. From our perspective, this comes across like a tense exchange between Jesus and his mother. It looks like Mary is trying to coerce Jesus into doing something he doesn't want to do, and he has to be kind of short with her to get her off his back. But that is not what is happening at all.
- b. Why did Mary come to Jesus with this at all, you might ask? Well, it might just be because Joseph has already died and she has been used to looking to Jesus, her oldest son, to help her figure out how to manage problems. But there is probably more going on than that. Remember how Luke tells us in chapter 2 of his gospel that Mary pondered all these things in her heart and stored them away. She heard the prophecy of Gabriel the angel, and she heard the report of the Shepherds. She listened to Simeon and Anna in the Temple prophesy over him about his great saving acts as the Messiah of his people. She probably knew about the testimony of John the Baptist – her cousin's son – and how he was proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah. And now Jesus shows up at the wedding with 5-7 disciples in tow. She must be wondering if now is the time for Jesus to vindicate her and their family. All these years they have been living under the suspicion that Mary had Jesus out of wedlock. All these years Jesus had rumors surrounding him of being an illegitimate child. But is now the time, Mary must wonder, for Jesus to step up and prove them all wrong?
- c. But she finds herself gently rebuked by her son in verse 4. He calls her woman and asks her what this has to do with him. His hour has not yet come, he says. The Greek word for woman is a courteous and respectful address, unlike what it might come across as in our day and age. It would be somewhat equivalent to our use of the word "ma'am". But even that doesn't quite capture the meaning. Mostly because it is a very unusual word for a son to use in addressing his mother, but "ma'am" is a perfectly acceptable way for a son to address his mother – especially in some states to our south. So, "woman" is still probably the best translation. And the point Jesus is making is to let her know that there is a fundamental change in the relationship between them. In fact, nowhere in John's Gospel is Mary's name used. She is always referred to as the mother of Jesus. And every interaction between her and Jesus shows that there is a new relationship. She is still his mother, and he still cares deeply for her. But there is no inside track to

him for her anymore. She is no longer to think of him as her son, but as the Son of God, the Messiah. She cannot enter into His Kingdom through blood, or the will of the flesh, or the will of man – but she must be born from God. Her relationship with Jesus must now be defined by who He is rather than by who she is as his mother.

- d. And he tells her that his hour has not yet come. This is a phrase we will run into several times in the Gospel. All the way until chapter 12 Jesus will say that his hour has not yet come. But then in chapter 12, during the last week of his life he will finally say that his hour has arrived. And it is the hour of his glorification through death, burial, and resurrection from the dead. Mary was asking for more than she knew, and Jesus initially turns her down to let her know that things are different now. Human effort, even the effort of the mother of Jesus will not refill the joy that has run out. She cannot have the divine power of the Messiah at her disposal, even if he is her human son.
- e. And, on a very important side note, this is a huge problem for those who would say that we should venerate Mary. She has been called the queen of Heaven and the co-redemptrix with Jesus. There is even a Roman Catholic Church in Rome which has a display of a cross in which Jesus is on one side and Mary is on the other – depicted as being crucified with him. False religions worship Mary and tell their followers that she should be prayed to as a mediator between us and God. She has been falsely labeled as sinless and lies about her own working of miracles have been spread.
- f. But that is not the picture we get in the Scriptures, of which are text is a prime example. If Mary is all that the Romans Catholics say she is, then in this instance she would certainly be able to coerce our Lord into doing what she thought was needing to be done. But she was not. He gently stopped her in her tracks and politely denied her request. All proving that human effort cannot refill the joy that has ended.
- g. But she doesn't stomp off in disgust. Rather, she persists in faith. She models for us what we all should have in Jesus. He should be our first call when trouble presents itself, and our faith in Him should be able to withstand the test of a delayed answer. Mary again says more than she understands in verse 5 when she says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Obviously, she knew she had come to the right person even if she didn't get the answer she wanted. And she truly believed that if he chose to do something, he could do it, so she tells the servants – do whatever he tells you to do. In other words, she has abandoned her effort and is totally dependent upon his divine control of the situation – just as it should be. True and lasting joy can never be produced by human effort. This type of joy which we all crave must come from a Divine source that is not dependent upon human ability and effort.

III. Religious Joy is Empty – vs. 6-7

- a. One of those human effort sources we so quickly turn to is religion. And that is the main one that Jesus is here confronting in Cana. Religion is simply that effort of humanity to make a way to relate to God and to be pleasing to God. That was

the state of most of the Jewish religion when Jesus showed up on the scene in AD 27. There was a faithful remnant – like Simeon and Anna and Mary and Joseph – but most were overcome by the teaching and the example of the Pharisees and the scribes. And their teaching was driven by man-dependent efforts to keep the Law of God. This was obviously oppressive and joy-sucking, and Jesus came to bring grace and truth, which would lead to true and lasting joy.

- b. But where is that in this text? Well, look at the minute details given in verses 6-8. John tells us that there were 6 stone jars there and that they each held between 20-30 gallons of water. So, there was a total of anywhere between 120 and 180 gallons of capacity in these 6 jars together. And Jesus tells them to fill them up with water – meaning they were empty, or mostly empty. But the key detail is that they were jars which held water for the Jewish rites of purification. In other words, these would be filled with water to wash their hands and their eating utensils in accordance with the strict requirements of the Pharisaical laws. These were laws that were in addition to the Law of Moses. They were man made laws intended to help people be more pleasing to God. And they are empty.
 - c. And on top of this, these jars are at a wedding ceremony where they are celebrating the union of one man to one woman for one life. And the Old Testament is replete with references to Israel as God's bride and to God as the Bridegroom, or to Israel as the wife and to God as the husband. In other words, human marriage has always been a living parable of a greater reality. It presents an everyday picture in living color of a deeper spiritual truth. The love and union and companionship and oneness of a human marriage are foretastes of these realities which are gloriously fulfilled in God's covenanted relationship with his people.
 - d. So, the sign here – not just the filling of the jars, but the reality of the empty jars – points to the problem in the heart of God's people. Their marriage to God is empty because they have looked to human dependent methods of purity to be pleasing to God. And this jar is always empty. It cuts itself off from the overflowing stream of joy found in the grace of God, and pretty soon the waters of purity are soiled by the stagnant sin of the human heart. Religious joy is an empty water pot.
- IV. Jesus Supernaturally Provides Super Abounding Joy – vs. 6-11**
- a. But Jesus intervenes and brings a supernatural answer which super abounds with real and true and lasting joy. He tells the servants to fill the water jars, and John tells us that they were filled to overflowing – to the brim. And then he tells them to draw some from the jar and take it to the master of the feast. This man is likely a close personal friend of the groom's – like a master of ceremonies. He tastes what has been brought to him, but he has no idea where it came from. He just knows that a few minutes ago they were out of wine and on the verge of a major catastrophe. Now, he is brought this wine which he describes as the good wine. And this master of ceremonies has been to enough weddings to know that usually people serve the good wine first and then when people have drunk freely, they

bring out the lesser wine – the not so great wine. But this bridegroom has apparently done the opposite.

- b. But the human bridegroom is contrasted here with the Messiah as the Bridegroom to his people. The human bridegroom is poor and needy and runs out of basic supplies which will bring joy to others. But Jesus as Messiah is the supernatural joy giver as the Bridegroom of his people. He brings a super abounding joy. Did you notice that the water jars would provide enough good wine for everyone at the feast for a very long time? The point is that this is a super abounding amount – it is way more than is needed. It is similar to the miracle Jesus will do in chapter 6 when he feeds the 5,000 men with five loaves and two fish. When it is over, they take up twelve baskets filled with the leftovers – way more than was needed. And Jesus interprets this for them and says to them in 6:35 – “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” There is always a super abundant supply in Jesus. It was way better than the wine the human bridegroom provided, and it was in a far greater supply. Think on these things!
- c. The joy of the wedding feast was abundantly restored and enhanced by this miraculous work of Christ to turn water into the best wine available. And this points us, as the first sign of Jesus as the Messiah, to the spiritual truth that true joy is found only in Him.
- d. Do you remember the first sign of Moses when he was confronting Pharaoh to let the children of Israel leave the slavery of Egypt? The Lord told him to stretch out his staff over the waters of Egypt and they would all turn to blood. And they did for 7 full days. This was a miraculous sign through Moses, and it was a sign of condemnation and judgment. The life-giving water of the Nile was turned into the omen of death in the land – blood! And this is the nature of the Law of God through Moses. It demands righteousness and complete purity and it brings condemnation and righteous judgment upon all who don't measure up – which is everyone. It also pointed to the reality that there would be no freedom from the slavery of Egypt without the shedding of blood. And this points forward to the truth that there is no freedom from sin without the shedding of blood. The Law demands a sacrifice for the remission of sins.
- e. And here Jesus, for his first sign, takes water and turns it – not into blood like Moses – but into wine – the natural symbol for abundant joy given by God. But how will this abundant joy be supplied forever and ever? Will God just give it out of his abundant supply? No, the hour of Christ must come first. This first sign points ahead to a looming hour where Jesus' glory will be most clearly seen as he lays down his life for his sheep and sheds his own blood for the remission of their sins. He will be crushed in the winepress of God's wrath and his blood will freely flow. Jesus will take the cup of God's wrath and he will drink it down to its dregs. And he will do this so that the cup of the New Covenant can be forever filled with the joy giving wine of his blood-bought salvation. And those who look to him in believing faith will drink forever of this never-ending supply of joy in the salvation of Christ.

Conclusion: In this way Jesus manifests his glory, and his disciples believed in him. They had already begun their journey of faith in him. They had already left everything and followed him on the promise that they would see something greater than him seeing Nathanael under the fig tree before he came to Jesus. Well, here they see something greater, and they believed all the more. But not everyone who saw it believed. There was a large crowd that day, but not everyone who was there believed in Jesus. Seeing the miraculous sign did not guarantee saving faith. And so, not seeing the sign in person does not prohibit saving faith. You didn't have to see it to believe it, or better yet, to believe in Jesus the Christ. Many saw and didn't believe, though some did. And many will never see it and will believe. How about you? The joy you crave can only be found through faith in Christ. The jars you are running to for joy will always be empty. Truly John's words at the end of this book are right – "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20:29)