

## **“Insight into Miracles and More”**

**John 2:1-11**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

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“Miracle” is a term that has been used so often and in such varying ways that it has almost no meaning. There are times when we use the term in desperation to describe our only hope for an ailing loved one. There are times when we use it in reference to athletic events, as in a miracle comeback. And there are times when we use it facetiously, like when the warden in *The Shawshank Redemption* says Andy’s escape from prison must have been a miracle. There is even a condiment called Miracle Whip which may drain the last ounce of meaning from the term.

To make matters worse, modern and postmodern people have come to dismiss the idea altogether. A miracle is an event that involves the extraordinary in some way – God, we say in the church – but moderns and post-moderns will say that there is always an ordinary explanation for everything. We may not know it yet, but there is always an explanation. So, there really is no such thing as a miracle.

So, what do we do with a story like the one we have read today from John 2, the one about Jesus changing water into wine? Did the writer make this up to convince people to believe in Jesus? Did Jesus use some resource available to him or have wine hidden away? We do sometimes ponder explanations for miracles. For example, Jesus may have fed the 5,000 not by magically stretching one little boy’s lunch into 5,000 lunches, but by using this boy’s example and thus encouraging others to share what they had. This would have been a miracle.

And even if he did change water into wine, without the use of grapes and a lot of time, what difference does this make for us? Is this an example story for how to save money on our dinner beverages if we can figure out how he did it? No, tempting as it might be to go there, that’s not the point of the story. There is more to it. There is a miracle of some kind which informs our understanding of miracles and there is something more.

Whatever is going on in this story, it begins with Mary being an advocate for the host family and asking Jesus to do something about the need for wine. We know the basic details, but a little cultural background helps us understand more. The wedding feast lasts a week and the host family is responsible for the food and drink. Wine is a key part of this. It is festive, it is healthier than the water and in Judaism it is always part of any religious feast. Even people who cannot afford wine on a daily basis must acquire some for high, holy occasions.

The trouble is this family in Cana has run out of wine and while this is not a life and death situation, hospitality is a central part of ancient Palestinian culture. To run out of wine is to run out of concern for your guests, though it may be that they have not done their part. While the host family is responsible for seeing that everyone has wine, one family does not necessarily provide all of the wine. It can be a community effort directed by the host family. The community may have fallen short. But even if this is the case, the host family will bear responsibility and experience public shame. This is no small thing.

So, Mary finds Jesus and says, “They have no wine.” He replies tersely, saying. “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” Various explanations have been given for how this might not sound inappropriate in this time in the original language, but it sounds bad to us. Even if it is not time to begin his ministry, and even if he feels grumpy, this is no way to talk to your mother... though I must add that my “affectionate” term for Dana, which she seems to understand, is “woman.” Can you imagine me saying *sweetie* or *darling* or *honeybunch*? Terms of endearment have to be authentic...

Anyway, no matter how Mary hears Jesus’ response, she says to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Mama is going to get her way! And as we know, Jesus follows through on her request, he makes some wine and the problem is solved. Maybe his hour has come. After all, this story marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in John’s Gospel. But it only happens because Mary provokes him to action.

So it often goes. Someone has to be the instigator, the advocate, the petitioner. This is not to say that God only intervenes when someone pleads with God to do so nor is it to say that when we do not experience

a miracle, we didn't plead in the right way. There is no formula for how and when God intervenes. So, we are wise to refrain from generalizations about miracles and providence. This is simply to say that when extraordinary things happen, often someone has sought them.

Consider the role of an advocate when we are in a hospital. Nurses and other staff have more needs than they can address. There are call buttons and if we have an urgent need, especially a medical one, staff need to respond quickly and usually do. But when we have a number of ordinary human needs, sometimes even medical ones, it is really helpful to have someone there to be our advocate, to go find help or provide it.

This is the kind of role Mary plays for the family in Cana and sometimes someone needs to play this role for us perhaps with God but more often with other people. We all need help somewhere along the way and we can all offer help at times - help the struggling friend find a counselor, help the person searching for affordable housing to find it, help the exhausted caregiver to take a break. For people to help address a specific need, they have to know the need exists.

Another thing we see in this story is that miracles involve a complex interaction between the ordinary and extraordinary, the human and divine. We tend to focus on the extraordinary. Jesus changes water into wine. But for the wedding guests to benefit from this miracle, some flesh-and-blood human beings have to do some very ordinary work.

John says Jesus tells the servants to fill stone jars with water which sounds simple enough, but these are the jars used for ritual purification. They hold about 20-30 gallons each. They are heavy enough by themselves, but they will be filled with about 200 pounds of water each. And so, the servants, quite possibly women, will have a monumental task figuring out how to get the wine to the people.

Details, details, details – I know – but someone has to attend to these details if the wine is to get to the people. What Jesus does with water is extraordinary, but in order for the miracle to be complete, some very ordinary work has to be done.

Such is the case almost always with the miraculous. There is a complex and mysterious mixture of human and divine effort and often it

is difficult to tell where one part ends and the other begins. And this creates space for an argument against miracles. If we can identify human involvement in some piece of the equation, then we can argue that God is not involved, there is no miracle. But just because human effort is involved does not mean God is not. Just because a surgeon's efforts help heal a person does not mean God isn't involved guiding the surgeon and helping in ways beyond our ability to discern.

In his insightful book *Prayer*, the renowned pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, George Buttrick, who I had the privilege to hear as a teenager, imagines a conversation between a preacher and a scientist about the story in Joshua where the Israelites encircle the ancient city of Jericho, blow their trumpets and the walls fall. The preacher asks why the walls fall. The scientist says they don't. The preacher says we have evidence that they fall. The scientist says, then, that an earthquake probably causes them to fall. That is possible, says the preacher, there is a fault line nearby, but why do they fall at that precise time? Mere coincidence, says the scientist, to which the preacher says coincidences are never mere, and the debate continues.

There is no resolution because a miracle cannot be proven or disproven, God's involvement cannot be proven or disproven, because there is a complex and mysterious mixture of the human and divine. But we cannot rule out God and the miraculous simply because we can explain some part of the experience.

It's a bit like something Dumbledore says to Harry Potter in the film *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2*. Trapped in a state between life and death, Harry asks the professor, who is not alive at this point in the story, "Is all this real or is it happening inside my head?" Dumbledore replies, "Of course, it's happening inside your head, Harry. Why should that mean that it's not real?" Such is the case with experiences we view to be miracles. Just because human effort is involved doesn't mean God isn't.

We talk often about the miracle of HOG, how the chaotic rehearsals at Hanging of the Greens become the worship service that flows so smoothly. There is a great deal of human effort involved, it doesn't just happen, but it still feels like there is more than human effort.

We talk also about the miracle of Toy Joy. There is a massive amount of human effort, passion, love and prayer invested by the planning team, in addition to Rodney and Jimmy's patience with all the space needed to store the gifts. But the end result points to something more than just the ordinary, the involvement of Someone else, guiding, empowering and using all of our efforts to enable others to know joy.

And there are so many other experiences that involve these same elements – the healing we know after illness, the resolution of a longstanding conflict which leads to reconciliation, the location of a job which finally provides fulfillment. I know people who had no chance of surviving, but they did; relationships which had no chance of healing, but they did; people who could not find the right job, but they did. In every case, extensive human effort was involved, but something or Someone else was involved too. That's the nature of miracles.

But there is something more to this story, something very significant to John. We gain insight into the nature of miracles in that they are often facilitated by an advocate and involve a complex mixture of the human and divine. But we also begin to understand the broader purposes of miracles. John refers to the changing of water into wine as a *sign*, the first of Jesus' *signs* which reveal his glory and enable his disciples to believe in him. This miracle serves immediate purposes - it provides hospitality for wedding guests and saves the host family from potential embarrassment. But it also serves another purpose, an even greater purpose - it tells people who Jesus is, it offers a sign of his realm.

What this suggests is that while our miracles will always serve an immediate purpose, they will also point to something or Someone larger. They will point to the goodness of God or the potential we have as God's children or both. So, if we experience healing, we are not only well physically, we have a new depth of faith, we trust that God will take care of us no matter what; not necessarily shield us from all harm or heal every ill, but care for us nonetheless. And if we experience something good in community, something that calls out the best in us, we not only have that experience, we learn something about ourselves and the God who calls us into community and gives us the gifts we have.

So, the fact that we experience the miracles of HOG and Toy Joy says something about other things we might do in God's grace and this weekend when our nation recognizes the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I think of the efforts we have made to build multicultural and interfaith relationships. It is not easy work and we don't feel like we have come very far. We share some ministries with the other half of First Baptist Church like Family Promise and the Egg Hunt, and we have some diversity here. We have done studies with Jewish and Muslim friends and built Habitat houses with an interfaith partnership. But it feels like so little in a time of much need.

Yet few churches have done as much as we have, there is something miraculous about our efforts. It takes a lot of human effort, a willingness to work through resistance and endure criticism, but it also takes more than human effort, only God can overcome some barriers. Yet if we are to take John's story seriously and understand that miracles are not just momentary experiences but signs of what can be, these efforts point to more.

First – we see through all of these experiences that God is the God of all people; all races, religions, walks of life and identities. God is in all people, God is ever more than we think, and once we realize this, we can never go back to a more limited understanding. Second – we see that we are called to be a reflection of God, what we have done thus far is a sign of more to come, we can build the kind of community that gives witness to who Christ really is and transforms the world. The Apostle Paul tells the churches of Galatia that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female, all are one in Christ (Gal. 3:28). Any church which embodies this reality experiences a miracle. We do and we have the potential to facilitate so much more.

Miracles come in many different shapes and forms. Some of them are very personal while others involve the whole community, but they usually involve both human and divine effort and they always point beyond the momentary experience to the goodness of God. We cannot prove any of this, but we don't have to. All we have to do is experience it and then allow it to change our lives and the world around us.