

Introduction

Can you imagine the buzz that Jesus' first miracle must have created? I bet he suddenly found himself on everyone's guest list for weddings and parties. The demand from caterers alone would have been overwhelming! No more squeezing the last drops out of the plastic bladder of the boxed wine! Not when Jesus is around.

But this miracle at the wedding in Cana wasn't about dazzling the crowd with divine power or securing a spot as the most sought-after party guest. What Jesus did here was deliver a profound message about transformation, purity, and a new way of connecting with God.

Let's dive into the story. To truly understand, we have to focus on the parts of the narrative that often go unnoticed or unexplained.

1. Starting with the timing: "On the Third Day"

The story opens with a curious detail: the wedding takes place "on the third day." Why mention the timing? Well, in Jewish tradition, the third day carries significant weight. It evokes resurrection, renewal, and divine revelation. That's why Jesus' resurrection occurring on the third day would have grabbed people's attention. By situating this first miracle on the third day, John's Gospel hints that something new is being birthed - a new covenant, a new understanding, and a new way to approach God.

2. Ok, now let's consider Mary's Role

Mary's presence is highlighted, and her interaction with Jesus is intriguing. She tells him, "They have no wine," and he gives a cryptic response. He says, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." It's easy to read this with an inflection that suggests derision or accusation, like "woman!!!!" A better way of translating it is to substitute the words "My Lady" or "O Woman". The word used here is an ordinary mode of addressing females. So, a softer "My Lady, or O Woman, what does this have to do with me..." is how it should be read. It's not the tone that's important. It's how this exchange helps set up the following scene. It hints at the fact that Jesus' mission is not about meeting expectations or performing miracles for show. Jesus is laying the groundwork for explaining his true purpose...and that brings us to the six stone jars...

3. The Stone Water Jars

The miracle hinges on six stone water jars, typically used for Jewish purification rites.

These jars held water meant to cleanse the hands, utensils, and other objects people might have touched and in so doing defiled themselves. Washing in this water ensures ritual purity which is vital for encountering the sacred. In Jewish tradition, to engage in purity rituals is to symbolically separate oneself from the mundane and visibly display a readiness to be close to God.

Purity rituals in and of themselves are not bad. They engage the whole person in the process of spiritual renewal. The flip side of this practice, however, is the potential for obsessive fear and legalism.

Some scholars suggest that the Pharisee's fear of impurity led to a lifestyle of fear, fear of defilement and contagion, fear of others, fear of spreading death. It was a lifestyle of avoidance—avoidance of Gentiles, of less-than-pure Jews, of places and people and circumstances that might potentially defile. But Jesus didn't live in fear, and he calls us to follow him without fear.

On this weekend of remembering the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., it's interesting to note that he considered purity to be a moral and spiritual principle tied to one's heart, intentions, and actions. For King such "purity" was the foundation for practicing nonviolence, loving one's enemies, and striving for justice. It was not about perfection but about aligning one's life with the values of love, truth, and justice, creating the conditions for personal and societal transformation.

King often contrasted purity with corruption, especially in relation to systemic injustice. He believed that achieving a just society required leaders and individuals to operate with moral purity, free from greed, hatred, or selfish ambition.

By transforming the water meant for purification into wine, Jesus communicates a profound truth: purity is no longer about external ritual. It is about an internal, personal transformation. Which brings us to the wine...

4. The Symbolism of Wine and Blood

Wine in Scripture often symbolizes joy, abundance, and blessing. Here, it also points to the life force running through Jesus' veins, which would be poured out for humanity; an act of blessing on his part. It points to the fact that he was ready to take his message of love and forgiveness as far as it could go. Even to the point of death.

The connection to purity becomes clear when we consider the sacrificial system of ancient Judaism. The blood of animals symbolically bore the guilt of the sinner, providing temporary atonement, making them pure for a time. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus, however, offers a permanent purification in that it offers a road map for how we are to live our lives. His mission becomes ours in that we too must make sacrifices. We too must take the message of love and forgiveness as far as we can. And we too must rise from the ashes of death and defeat when that message is ignored.

It isn't the role of the purity ritual that Jesus is challenging but its focus. For Jesus, it's not a matter of what one touches that defiles because purity has to do with what flows out of the heart (Matt. 15:17–20).

5. Purity Redefined

So this miracle story is really meant to make us question whether we are ready to encounter the sacred. The Holy One is ready to bring into being something new in us, every day in fact, but are we ready to let go of any fear that might get in our way; fear of not being good enough, or pure enough? The Holy One is ready to join us in our efforts and empower us to be conduits of the Holy Spirit, but are we ready to give up our rote, disingenuous promises? What God asks of us is open hearts, and honest commitment to the hard work of the Gospel. God asks us to continually transform our internal selves to match the spirit of our Good Works.

In early Judaism, purity was considered vital because it represented a state of closeness to God; essentially, being "pure" meant being prepared to come close to God. We too can seek closeness to God. We too can prepare ourselves. The life and death and resurrection of Jesus provides us the roadmap. It informs how we are to live our lives both internally and externally. In the process of living in this way, may we experience the joy of such transformation and the abundance of God's never ending grace. Amen.