John 2:1-11 *The Grave Robber: The Wine Maker*

***Cut and Paste Bible***

The Smithsonian museum in Washington has on display a leather-bound book in which Thomas Jefferson pasted all the passages from the gospels that contain no miraculous elements. For Jefferson, who believed in the ethical teaching of Jesus but could not stomach the idea of the supernatural, this was a more palatable version of the Bible and the one he read every day toward the end of his life.

There are similar, so-called “rational” approaches to studying the Bible today. The “quest for the historical Jesus” has long taken as one of its assumptions that anything not conforming to the known laws of nature must be invented. At the Jesus Seminar, for instance, a group of scholars got together and used a system of colored beads to vote on whether a certain saying or event in the Bible actually happened or not. Red beads for things that they felt certainly happened, black beads for things that they felt were made up. Anything that hinted at the miraculous automatically got a black bead.

This is the 21st Century, after all. We have a very scientific understanding of the world. The idea that normal operations of nature could be interrupted seems rather improbable.

And yet, you cannot read through the gospel accounts of Jesus without encountering miracles. You can take a scissors and cut out the parts that offend science, you can cast all the black beads you want, but the picture of Jesus that you end up with will be a mere caricature of the Jesus the Bible presents.

The Bible insists that Jesus is God in human flesh. He was with God in the beginning and without Him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3, 14) If He is indeed the Son of God, then it shouldn’t surprise us that He is capable of manipulating the world He made to do things that we wouldn’t normally expect. In fact, we would expect it to happen a lot. There would be no better way for Him to prove He is who the Bible says He is.

But that raises an interesting observation about the miracles in the Bible. When you get down to it, there really aren’t that many. Depending on how you count them, Jesus is only described performing about three dozen miracles. They are not common occurrences—that’s what makes them “miracles” instead of “ordinaries.” For every sick person Jesus healed and every funeral He broke up, there must have been hundreds, even thousands of similar cases in Israel that He never did a thing about.

Moreover, when Jesus does do a miracle, instead of hyping them up, the Bible often downplays them. “Often Jesus asked those who had seen a miracle not to tell anyone else. Some miracles, such as the Transfiguration or the raising of a twelve-year-old girl, he let only his closest disciples watch, with strict orders to keep things quiet. Though he never denied someone who asked for physical healing, he always turned down requests for a demonstration to amaze the crowds and impress important people. Jesus recognized early on that the excitement generated by miracles did not readily convert into life-changing faith.” (Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 166)

In fact, for those who were reluctant to believe in Jesus to begin with, His miracles did little to change their minds. Sometimes they denied the facts right in front of them, sometimes they claimed it was magic or the Devil’s power, sometimes (as in the case of poor Lazarus) they sought to cover up the evidence. Miracles in Jesus’ day seemed as peculiar as they would in our own. Philip Yancey says: “Then, as now, miracles aroused suspicion, contempt, and only occasionally faith.” (Yancey, p. 166)

I believe in Jesus’ miracles, of course. I believe that He is the Son of God who came to earth trailing clouds of glory, so it isn’t hard for me to accept that He was capable of things no one else could do.

But still, the question is raised: if Jesus wasn’t seeking to fix every problem, and if miracles weren’t a guarantee that people would believe in Him, what was the purpose of the miracles He did?

***The Grave Robber***That leads me to our new sermon series: *The Grave Robber*. For the next seven weeks, right up to Easter Sunday, we are going to be doing a series of sermons that corresponds to our small group campaign based on the book by Mark Batterson. If you are in a small group, and you haven’t done so already, you can pick up your study guide at the kiosk with Ray. If you are not in a group, and you would like to be, or if you just want your own copy of the study guide, you can stop by and visit with Ray as well.

And the idea of this book, the idea of our sermon series, is to look at the 7 miracles that are recorded in the Gospel of John.

Of the four books of the Bible that tell the story of Jesus—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—John stands out for having a rather unique perspective. The other three—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are often called the “synoptic gospels” because they share a lot of the same stories and the same basic structure. It is possible to print Matthew, Mark and Luke side-by-side in three columns and find a lot they have in common.

But John’s book follows its own path. It’s still clearly about the same Jesus, the climax of the book is the crucifixion and the resurrection, but it tells the story of Jesus differently. And one of the things that is different is that it only records Jesus doing 7 miracles.

Now, as I said, there are only about 3 dozen distinct miracles attributed to Jesus in the Bible. 34, to be precise, if you leave out the Big 3 of his conception, resurrection, and ascension. But John chooses to record only 7 of them. And he has an interesting word for them. He calls them “signs.” **John 2:11**, the last verse of our passage for today, says:

**11**What 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.

John is very clear that the purpose of His book is that we will know that Jesus is the Son of God and that we will believe in Him (John 20:31). He wants us to see the glory of Jesus (John 1:14). He could have told of many more miracles (John 20:30), but the ones he has included he has included for a very specific reason. They are signs. They point to a deeper reality. Each one of them tells us something about Jesus.

Bible scholar D.A. Carson writes:

Jesus’ miracles are never simply naked displays of power, still less neat conjuring tricks to impress the masses, but *signs*, *sign*ificant displays of power that point beyond themselves to the deeper realities that could be perceived with the eyes of faith. (*The Gospel According to John*, p. 175)

So, on our journey towards Easter, we’re going to look at these 7 signs in John and see what they teach us about Jesus. And the first sign, the one John 2:11 is referring to, is Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana.

You’ve already seen the story. The video at the beginning of the message comes from a movie called “The Gospel of John” which portrays Jesus’ life using only the words from John’s gospel. It is our plan to show each miracle from that movie. But now, let me read it as well. **John 2:1-11:**

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, **2**and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. **3**When 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.”

**5**His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

**6**Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

**7**Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim.

**8**Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.”

They did so, **9**and 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 **10**and 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.”

**11**What 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.

***No Wall Flower***

Miracles are signs of deeper realities. John includes them to teach us about Jesus. So what do we learn?

There are a couple of things we can observe about Jesus from this story. The first thing is that **Jesus is kind of guy who was comfortable at a party.**

Jesus and his disciples get invited to a wedding. We don’t know whose wedding it was, but the fact that he and his friends and his mother were all invited suggest that it may have been a relative or at least a close family friend. Mary’s attempt to resolve the shortage of wine even suggests that she may have had some responsibility for the catering.

Now, in the village life of Galilee a wedding brought celebration into an otherwise drab existence. The bridegroom and his men would parade through the streets to fetch the bride’s party by torchlight, then everyone rushed to the groom’s house for a feast worthy of royalty. A wedding celebration could last as long as a week—the newlyweds didn’t get a honeymoon so much as an extended party.

Think of happy scenes from *Fiddler on the Roof*: peasant Jewish families dancing across the courtyard in their finest embroidered clothes, music and laughter, banquet tables straining to hold up clay platters piled high with food, and jugs and jugs of wine.

And Jesus is the kind of guy who is comfortable at a party like this.

It must have been quite a shock to His disciples—especially to the two who have just been out in the desert with John the Baptist (John 1:37). They’re used to a teacher who wore animal skins and survived on a subsistence diet. To them, the path to God has been grim and dour. And now here’s Jesus laughing at a table filled with food, dancing with the peasant girls? It’d be fun to know what they were thinking.

But as comfortable as Jesus was with the fun, the fun wasn’t going to last. John tells us that the wine ran out.

For a wedding like this, the financial responsibility lay with the groom. To run out of supplies would be a dreadful embarrassment in a “shame-based” culture. There is even some evidence that insulted members of the bride’s family could sue a poorly supplied groom.

So Mary does the only thing she can think of: she brings the problem to Jesus. There’s no reason to believe she expected a miracle, but Jesus is her oldest son, quite probably at this point he is the chief bread winner in her home (tradition holds that Joseph passed away before Jesus began His ministry), and she has come to rely on His resourcefulness.

**Jesus’ answer to her** is not exactly rude, but it isn’t exactly endearing either. “Dear woman,” he says in verse 4, “why do you involve me? My time has not yet come.”

You can almost imagine what is running through Jesus’ head. If he fixes the wine problem that will mean his time has come. From that moment on his life will change. If word of his powers leaks, he will soon hear pleas from needy people up and down Israel. Crowds will flock: epileptics, paralytics, deaf-mutes, the demon-possessed, not to mention any street beggar looking for a quick dose of wine. Fact finding teams will come from the capital. A clock will start ticking that will not stop until Calvary.

***The* Sign*ificance of the Miracle***

And yet, Jesus does not refuse His mother. He does the miracle, and in the process His time begins. Jesus pours out new win and thus **identifies Himself as the true bridegroom**. The sign this miracle points to is a time of joy.

**Verse 6** is a very significant verse in this story:

**6**Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

When Jesus instructs the servants to fill some containers with water, He chooses some very specific containers. He doesn’t tell them to fill some wine barrels. He doesn’t tell them to refill the empty wine skins. He tells them to fill these six stone water jars which, John tells us, were “the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing.”

In other words, these six jars are a symbol of the old way of doing things. Ceremonial washing. They didn’t wash their hands to keep the germs away—they didn’t know about germs—they washed their hands in an effort to make themselves clean before God. These six jars were a reminder, even at a wedding, that the rules needed to be kept. They were representative of the whole law-based system that said only by the strictest adherence to the legal code could one be acceptable to God. It was a system that was driven by guilt and shame.

And now, Jesus is filling them with wine. Lots of wine. At 20 to 30 gallons apiece in six stone jars filled to the brim there would have been enough for 757 bottles of wine. The best wine the wedding host had ever tasted!

By the way: there’s no reason to believe that this was anything other than real wine, which was common in that culture. Jesus was not a teetotaler. This doesn’t mean that Christians should be drunkards: underage drinking, binge drinking, and drunk driving are problems that the first Century knew little of, which we should be very careful about. The Biblical perspective on alcohol is one of moderation and self-control, but it is never a perspective of outright prohibition.

In the Old Testament, wine is a symbol of the joy that will come in the Messianic age (e.g. Jer. 31:12). It’s evocative of times of prosperity and celebration.

And by turning the water from the ceremonial washing jugs into the wine of a wedding feast, Jesus seems to be saying that the days of guilt and shame-based religion are being replaced by a time of celebration and joy. Indeed, in Matthew 9 when Jesus is asked why his disciples don’t follow the religious rules of fasting, Jesus identifies himself as the bridegroom who is bringing new wine. **Matthew 9:15 & 17:**

 “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast…

**17**Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.”

The deeper reality this miracle points to seems to correspond very well with what we see of Jesus and his willingness to attend a party: Things are different with Jesus, it’s not about rules and regulations, but about the joy and celebration of life.

***Meet the Right Jesus***

In **verse 11** John tells us that following this miraculous sign, Jesus’ disciples put their faith in Jesus. As we’ve seen, that’s one of the reasons John tells us the story. The stated purpose of the book is that we will believe that Jesus is the Christ and put faith in Him.

But it’s important that we see, right here at the beginning of the book, that we have to have the right idea of who Jesus is. John wants to make sure we are meeting the right Jesus.

It’s easy to get the wrong idea of religion. So many religions are about restrictions, austerity and deprivation. So much religious experience looks dull, grey, and bland. In most cases, religion is something you do because you have to: your parents make you, the culture shames you, it’s the only way to save your soul.

At times, the Christian church has made following Jesus look a lot like that. The Church can be a very “shame-based” culture, using rules and an emphasis on appearances to turn faith into a dull, restrictive thing.

But that’s not the picture we get of faith in Jesus here. Jesus doesn’t come off as an ascetic but as someone full of life. The symbolism of the water jars and the wine clearly represents the ushering in of a new era. The time for ceremonial washing is past; the time for celebration is here.

If I dare to say it, this passage is inviting us to experience joy in Jesus. You’ve heard that phrase before, right?

No matter what impression the church may have given about what it means to be religious; no matter how serious and severe other religions may attempt to be; following Jesus is not about long faces and the denial of fun. Jesus is bringing new wine—abundant, superlative wine. And **He’s inviting us to find the freedom and joy that comes from putting our faith in Him.**

***Babbette’s Feast***

I wonder if I can tell a story that gives a picture of what I think this passage wants us see.

In his excellent book *What’s So Amazing about Grace?* Philip Yancey summarizes the plot from a story by the Danish author Isak Dinesen called “Babette’s Feast.” It’s a story that was made into a Danish film in the 1980’s. I haven’t read the story or seen the film, so I’ll rely on Yancey’s summary to tell it to you.

The story is set in an impoverished fishing village on the coast of Denmark; a town of muddy streets and thatched-roof hovels. In this grim setting, there is a band of even grimmer residents; the followers of a strict Lutheran sect. This group of worshippers rejects all worldly pleasures. They dress all in black and eat only boiled cod and a gruel made from boiling bread.

The church is led by a couple of spinster sisters, the daughters of the founding pastor. The rules they follow were established by their father, but since his passing the group has splintered. One member holds a grudge against another concerning some business matter. Rumors spread about a thirty-year-old affair involving two of the members. A pair of old ladies have not spoken to each other for a decade. They still meet every Sabbath and sing the old hymns, but only a handful bother to attend.

Then, one rainy night, the sisters find a woman collapsed on their front step. She speaks no Danish, but carries a letter from an acquaintance who had moved away to France. The letter explains that the woman’s name is Babette and that she lost her son and husband during the civil war in France. Because her own life was in danger, the friend had sent her on to the two sisters, hoping that they could take her in. The last line of the letter says, simply, “Babette can cook.”

The sisters are wary, but they decide to employ Babette as a maid. The first time they show her how to split a cod and make the gruel her nose wrinkles a little, but she never questions her assignments. For twelve dreary years she keeps their house and attends their drab little religious services.

Then one day, Babette receives a letter from Paris. A friend has been playing the lottery for her and she has won. The letter contains a check for ten thousand francs. The sisters congratulate Babette, but inwardly their hearts sink. They know that soon Babette will be leaving.

As it happens, Babette’s winning the lottery coincides with the very time the sisters are considering a celebration to honor the 100th anniversary of their deceased father’s birth. For the first time ever, Babette makes a request of the sisters: she would like to cook a real French dinner for the anniversary service.

The sisters have misgivings, but they agree. Suddenly, Babette is a flurry of activity as she orders ingredients and the whole village begins to gossip as all manner of exotic items arrive at the wharf.

The sisters explain their predicament to the eleven remaining members of the sect. Tongues were meant for praise and thanksgiving, not for indulging in exotic tastes. Together, they make a pact that they will eat the meal, but they will withhold comment less Babette get the wrong idea.

As the meal begins, the Lutherans are all somber and quiet. Only an unexpected dinner guest, a general who once courted one of the two sisters, comments on the meal. As course after course comes to the table, he cannot get over its quality. His work has brought him all over the globe, he declares, but only once has he had such a fine meal—at the Café Anglais in Paris, a restaurant once renowned for its woman chef.

Eventually, the quality of the food and the drink works its magic on the churlish villagers. Their blood warmed. Their tongues loosened. They spoke of the old days when the pastor was alive and of the Christmas when the bay froze. The member who had cheated another on a business deal finally confessed, and the two women who had feuded found themselves conversing. A woman burped, and the member next to her said without thinking, “Hallelujah!”

Babbette’s feast introduces something new into the lives of these strict Lutherans: Joy. Suddenly guilt and shame make way for celebration.

The story ends with two scenes. Outside, the old-timers join hands around the fountain and lustily sing the old songs of faith. It is a communion scene: Babette’s feast opened the gate and grace stole in. In the story Dinesen writes that they felt “as if they had indeed had their sins washed white as wool, and in this regained innocent attire were gamboling like little lambs.”

The final scene takes place inside in the wreck of a kitchen, piled high with unwashed dishes and greasy pots. The two sisters realize that, in accordance to their vow, no one has spoken to Babette. “It was quite a nice dinner Babette,” one of them manages to mutter. “We will remember this evening when you go back to Paris.”

But Babette tells them she will not be going back to Paris. All her friends and relatives have been killed or imprisoned. And, besides, it would be expensive to return to Paris.

But what about the ten thousand francs?

Then Babette drops the bombshell. She has spent her winnings, every last franc, on the feast they have just devoured. “Don’t be shocked,” she tells them, “that is what a proper dinner for twelve costs at the Café Anglais, where I was once the chef.”

***An Invitation***

The life of faith that Jesus invites us to is not one of solemn and fearful observance. Don’t think that because you have decided to follow Him you’re not allowed to enjoy life, or have any fun. Instead, Jesus has invited us to celebration. A life of joy. The old order of things must give way to the new wine that Jesus is bringing.

The kingdom of heaven is very much like a wedding celebration, or a fine French feast served on a cold Danish coast--Jesus has paid the price for this celebration and He has invited us to come and savor it.

He is inviting you to find the freedom and joy that comes from putting your faith in Him.