

"ABUNDANCE AND JOY"

John 2:1-11

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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Isn't it great that Jesus was invited to a wedding? He wasn't asked to officiate or bless the couple or say a prayer at the reception. He was just an invited guest like everyone else. His Mom and his first few disciples were there too. In the New Testament Jesus does a lot of eating and drinking with all kinds of people, but I think this is the only time we see him at a wedding celebration.

Weddings at that time were seven-day events for the whole community. The groom's family hosted the celebration at their home with the best of everything they could offer. People were eating and drinking, dancing, and talking. And there is Jesus, relaxing with his friends when his mother walks up to him and says, "Jesus, they are running out of wine."

Maybe your Mom is like mine, all she has to do is make one simple comment and you know what you are supposed to do. But Jesus's response surprises us. "Hey Mom, it's not my problem and it's not your either." Mary doesn't respond to him she just tells the servants, "Do whatever he says." And she walks away.

So maybe this isn't an ordinary wedding after all because this wedding provides the opportunity for Jesus's first miracle recorded in the Gospel of John. It is the moment when the glory of his divinity walked right into our world and splashed all over us with extraordinary abundance.

My New Testament professor at Seminary called the Gospel of John the "Strange Gospel" in part because it is so different from the other three. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels because they are so similar. John takes his own path. He focuses more on Jesus's divinity than on his humanity. Jesus is portrayed as a stranger, as a visitor from above, the only One who can provide the Truth.

In John's Gospel, Jesus speaks in long meandering monologues, gives confusing answers to simple questions, and speaks more about himself than in the other three Gospels.

There is no birth story in John, no information about Joseph and Mary. In chapter one, Jesus appears as an adult on the banks of the Jordan River where he is recognized as the Messiah by John and baptized. He chooses his first few disciples and the next thing we know he is at a wedding.

The writer of John's Gospel doesn't talk about miracles but about "signs." The supernatural acts of Jesus performed in this Gospel are not done as an end in themselves but are symbols of his relationship with God. They give us a more complete picture of Jesus and lead the reader on the path of faith. Believing is often the first response of those who witness these signs. They are intended to lead us to a deeper and more mature faith.

Near the end of the Gospel, John writes, *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (20:30-31)*

Though it must be read forward, the Gospel of John can only be understood backwards. Everything Jesus says and does is leading up to the cross, when "his hour has come." John's Jesus is omniscient; he knows his end from the very beginning. The main purpose of his three-year ministry leading up to his death and resurrection is to plant seeds in his followers that will take root and grow into mature and life-giving faith.

Another interesting thing about the Gospel of John is that he only mentions the mother of Jesus twice- once here at the beginning of his ministry and once at the end at the foot of the cross. John never calls her by name. But she is there- encouraging her son at his first sign and supporting him at his last breath. In this Gospel, Mary has a good understanding of who her son truly is and somehow she knew when it was time to get the ball rolling so she said to him, "They are running out of wine." Although he made a slight protest, he must have known it was time too because right there in that ordinary human setting bloomed a grand moment of extravagant divine wonder.

For John the story is much bigger than the mysterious appearance of good wine at a wedding, this was the first sign of God's promised salvation. The eschatological hopes of the Old Testament prophets suddenly had a face, and it was the face of Jesus. The human world with its flaws and limitations was suddenly invaded by the glorious abundance of God made visible in the ridiculous amount of spectacular wine, which, to human eyes, came out of nowhere.

You would think such an amazing thing would have received a great deal of attention- but hardly anyone knew about it. Mary and Jesus knew, of course, and at some point, the disciples found out what happened. But everyone else only knew a part of the story. The servants filled the huge jars with water, but they didn't taste the finished product. The Chief Steward tasted it and was amazed but he thought the groom had provided it. The groom had no clue that any of this was even happening. In fact, the narrator never tells us that Jesus turned the water into wine. And no one saw him do it.

Perhaps the most important part of this story comes at the end. *"Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."*

Theologian Karoline Lewis points out that *"Jesus's push into public ministry is not his baptism or his testing in the wilderness but the coaxing of his mother. She encouraged him to be who he is."* (1)

Remember, for the writer of John's Gospel, the whole purpose of signs is to reveal something about Jesus. This is his first public outing since calling the disciples and they are the ones who realized what had happened and Jesus's role in it and they believed in him. Their journey of faith had begun. I wouldn't be surprised if, in the weeks and years to come, every time they drank wine, or attended a wedding, they remembered that wedding in Cana, and what it meant to all of them and to the world.

If this story tells us anything, it tells us that our God is an extravagant God. There is nothing stingy about a God who would provide 180 gallons of exquisite wine when a couple of boxes of the cheap stuff would have done just as well.

There is nothing stingy about a God who would arrive on earth clothed in nothing but human flesh and blood.

There is nothing stingy about a God who would give up everything to show us how deeply and how dearly we are loved.

Our God is about transformation- complete, over the top, outrageous transformation. Jesus's earthly ministry began with a generous gift of grace, a foretaste of the amazing gift of new life that Jesus will bring. Throughout the Gospel of John, we find that wherever Jesus goes abundance follows. Enough wine for everyone and then some. Enough grace for everyone and then some. Jesus is the gift that keeps on giving.

We live in a world that thrives on scarcity and fear. Corporations and politicians make their living by convincing us that there is not enough. When we are afraid that there will not be enough for us, we tend to turn other people into our competition and our enemies. We will protect what we have at all costs. We will hoard what we do have whether it be money or faith. Through the window of faith, though, we see the world in a very different way. According to John, when Jesus arrived, things broke open and spilled over.

When Jesus shows up the thirsty drink, the hungry eat, the blind see, the lame dance. William Barclay summed it up beautifully when he wrote, *"No need on earth can exhaust the grace of Christ, there is a glorious superabundance in it."*

So here we are, recipients of abundant grace, abundant love, abundant new life. Through the love of Jesus Christ, a window has been opened, a window through which we see the God who created us, the One who loves us as though we are the only one to love.

But how do we live this reality in a time of scarcity? Remember just a year or so ago when hospitals couldn't get enough Personal Protection Equipment? Remember how hard it was to find a vaccine when they were finally available?

Have you found a home Covid test kit anywhere recently? There is a shortage of nurses and teachers, restaurant workers and store clerks right now. And a great shortage of grace, kindness, and patience too.

Living in the extravagance of God doesn't mean that things will always be easy for us. It doesn't mean we will always have everything we need or want. What it does mean is that we are always loved; always forgiven; always welcome; always drenched with grace. It also means that we are always a part of a community of grace where we are expected to care about the common good. It means that we are always called to seek the best for everyone- not just for ourselves.

It can be difficult today to feel the embrace of that community while our physical interactions with other people are so limited- and rightly so, to keep everyone safe and healthy. But there are ways in which I see you sharing the abundance of Jesus even in the midst of a pandemic.

Some of you send cards to let people know you are thinking of them. Some of you make phone calls to check in with others. Some give folks rides to the doctor and other appointments.

During December you donated bags of groceries to the local food pantry. You filled our Mitten Tree to overflowing- so much so that the tree fell over! You donated thousands of dollars to Heifer for their life-giving work in Guatemala.

Abundance overflows as you pray for each other and for me. Our Witness Commission is currently working on ways to reach out to and support our community.

Even in the midst of a pandemic, and maybe especially in the midst of a pandemic, the abundance of God can bring joy and new life. And it will, if we are willing to participate in Jesus's subversive plot to welcome God's grace into our world.

Mary knew- and we know too---

Our God is an extravagant God.

What do you say to a God like that?

You say "thank you" and then live as though you believe it to be true.

May it be so with us. Amen.

End Notes:

- *JOHN, Karoline Lewis, Fortress Press. 2014. P.38.*