

“The First Sign”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 9, 2022

First Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 104:1a, 14-16, 31-34

Rev. John Wahl

John 2:1-11

“They don’t have any wine.”

When I read Mary’s words, I hear a question in her voice as she points out to her son Jesus that the hosts of the wedding have run out of wine. I also hear a familiar question that we carry deeply within ourselves: what if there isn’t enough? Are we going to run out?

It’s a question of scarcity that I hear in Mary’s voice; and Jesus answers it, as he always does, with abundance.

The setting for this story about the first of Jesus’ miracles – what the gospel of John calls “signs” – is a wedding. Jesus and his mother are both there; suggesting that it might have been the wedding of a family member or close friend. We are told that the disciples – we met four of them in the first chapter – have also been invited.

Weddings, in Jesus’ day, were a great community cause for celebration; often lasting for several days. We are told that that this wedding took place on the third day, which may be some reference to the abundant joy of the resurrection that is coming. But, if you add the four days that passed in the first chapter while Jesus encountered John the Baptist and his first disciples, we are now at day seven: the day of completion, the day for celebrating the gifts of God’s creation.

Jesus and his mother and his disciples are guests at this wedding celebration; but, now, there is a problem. Why did they run out of wine at the most important event happening in the village of Cana? Did the host fail to plan accordingly? Were there more guests than the hosts had anticipated? What went wrong?

However, the problem is not just a shortage of wine, but a shameful feeling of poverty and scarcity at the precise moment when the host wants to convey the richness of hospitality. One possible reason that the wine ran out was that guests would be expected – according to the prevailing etiquette of the time – to bring their own wine: it was a BYOW wedding. But, the disciples, the mother of Jesus, and Jesus himself were voluntarily poor; they had begun to travel the region with no food or

drink, no extra coat, no place to lay their head. Maybe, they have been imbibing, but did not bring wine as a gift for the wedding party.¹

We don't know if this was the case, the text doesn't say. But maybe it begins to explain why the mother of Jesus, a guest, is so concerned that the wine had run out. Did she know: that Jesus could do something to solve this problem and allow the host to avoid the shame that would follow if the rest of the guest discovered there was nothing left to drink?

Based on her son's response, "Woman, what does that have to do with me," it might seem that Mary's confidence was misplaced. Was Jesus being hostile (get off my back) or disengaged (it's none of my business)? And, by the way, *is that any way to speak to your mother?*

Apart from our youngest son, Jack, all of our kids are now in their twenties. They are at that age when it's not clear – when they encounter someone our age, maybe the parents of their friends – how to address them. Is it still Mr. or Mrs. – or, now that they are adults, is it acceptable to use first names; would they be comfortable doing it; and do they even know them?

Maybe there is similar dynamic taking place here; Jesus, a young adult, is at the same wedding as his mother; but, he's not a child, he doesn't have to do everything she asks; especially when she really didn't ask him to do anything about the wine; she just pointed out, *there's no more*. Nevertheless, the mother of Jesus acts as if her son has given a clear *yes* to her implied request; like any mother would have, she likely said to Jesus (although we're not privy to this part of the conversation), *I believe in you; you can do it*. As a result, and with complete confidence in her son, she instructs the servants to "do whatever he tells you."²

The miracle, the sign, that follows is a quiet one. Jesus tells the servants to fill the empty stone jars – the ones that would have been used for a ritual of cleansing – with water. Then, they are to draw from them and take it to the headwaiter. Jesus doesn't tell them what he is doing or why. We're clearly told that the headwaiter didn't know where the wine came from, thus giving credit for this generous act of hospitality to the groom. There is no shame; no more worries about not having enough. The celebration only gets better.

The events at Cana reveal the divine glory which radiates from Jesus; a glory that is both loving and life-giving. In the first chapter of John's gospel, we are told that "from his fullness," we receive "grace upon grace." On the surface, it may not seem that providing guests, who have already been drinking for days, more wine – what turns out to be the equivalent of another 1000 bottles of wine – is the most

¹ Robert Hoch from *WorkingPreacher.com*

² Karoline M. Lewis, *John: Fortress Bible Preaching Commentaries*

important miracle. But, the author wants us to see it as a sign: one that points to the true identity of the one who performs it.³

John presents Jesus as one who offers abundance. Jesus, as the one who embodies God, who shows us God, is the one who shows us abundance. John's story about the wedding feast at Cana – of water changing into wine – is a story about overcoming scarcity and poverty to discover the richness of true abundance.

Abundance; how much is enough? This is a critical question; not only as we look at our checkbooks and portfolios, but as we make our way in the world and in our Christian faith. The question of abundance may sometimes be about time or energy or positive thoughts, but it is also an economic one: about quantity; it demands calculations about dollars and barrels, interest rates and tax brackets.

The expected Christian response to these calculations could be that real abundance ought to be measured in terms of quality, not quantity; that the good life, life lived with God, cannot be measured by mere numbers. To some extent, that is true: who we are is not defined by what we have, and we know that we cannot take it with us when we go.

Still, as the details of this story about the wedding at Cana tell us, abundance is not just about quality: that the best wine came at the end; but, also, about quantity: that Jesus provided for his fellow guests – and, thus, prevented shame coming upon the host the host – extravagantly and abundantly, with grace upon grace.

If we are faithful followers of Jesus, if we care about the good life, a spiritual life, life lived in and with Jesus, then we need to pay attention to what abundance means in our world today. Are we aware that Cleveland consistently has one of the highest rates of poverty in the nation? Are we okay with the fact that food banks are still nearly twice as busy as they were at the beginning of the pandemic? Have we taken notice that climate disasters – such as tornadoes, floods, and wildfires – are exacting rapidly increasing costs, human and material, as our earth continues to warm?

While these may seem like problems with quantities that are beyond our ability to help, the stories of Jesus remind us that transformation and salvation happen day by day, person by person. The abundance of God, revealed through the extravagance of Jesus, appears to us in human situations: like a wedding banquet, a woman going to the well, a boy with loaves and fish, a shepherd tending sheep, and a mother whose child is sick. These are not unlike our neighbors and family members; guests and hosts, young and old, strangers and friends, in need of help or in a position to give.

³ Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*

When we think of what life is about, what abundance really means, then the question can change from the fearful scarcity of *will there be enough?* to a new one: *how shall I live a life of abundance where there is enough for all?*⁴ What do we have that might be shared? To whom can we give that might grow in abundance from it?

This season of Epiphany – spanning from the joyful celebration of the magi arriving at the manger to the pensive moment of Ash Wednesday – is about the manifestation of Jesus; the one from whom we receive grace upon grace. What we see, learn, and know about Jesus takes on a complexity and interest when it is not limited to a one-sided portrait, but we recall that he is the son of Mary and the Son of God; that he is the seemingly reluctant guest who brings great honor to the host; that he is the maker of all things and author of our new creation.

Jesus said to Mary, “my time hasn’t come,” but his mother knew better.⁵ This is the starting place; where the first sign appears; where the gift of abundance is extravagantly given. Often, as we know, there is no perfect place, or time, or circumstance, for beginnings; there is no single right path for us follow, but that we can’t be walking until we take the first step. Thanks be to God.

Lord Jesus, God made manifest, thank you for the signs of glory that you have given. May we praise and honor you because your Spirit comes upon us and gives us the faith we need to open our hearts and live life with you and others in abundance. Amen.

⁴ Anne Sutherland Howard, “Finding Wild Space” from *Day1.org*

⁵ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*