

John 2:1-11
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“Signs and Symbols”

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My Father once officiated a wedding in El Paso, Texas. The groom was a dear family friend, and the event was to take place in the bride’s parents’ backyard. The day for the wedding came and the backyard was beautifully decorated, the participants rehearsed earlier in the day. But, what no one thought about was... due to the timing of the ceremony, there would be a declining amount of sunlight. And of course, about half way through the ceremony the sun began setting and Dad didn’t have enough light to read the words of his worship book. Someone quickly secured a flashlight and stood beside Dad so he could finish the ceremony.

I often advise couples preparing for their wedding that, even if they are the best event planner ever, it is reasonable to expect that something will go wrong. With all the moving parts to a wedding it seems often something still go awry.

Miraculous things happen at weddings also. The first wedding I performed after my ordination was for my cousin Jeff and his wife Tammy in Key West, Florida. The wedding was on the end of a pier with the ocean waves crashing gently below our platform. The brief ceremony began under bright sunlight and blue skies, yet before the end a storm was brewing that cut the ceremony short. As we dashed for the covered pavilion on the beach a local man was riding by on his bike in the rain. He did not speak but he stopped and came over to us. He began taking palm fronds from nearby trees, selecting them carefully and started weaving them. We were all mesmerized as we watched. He kept weaving for a minute or two and when he was done, he handed the bride and groom a beautiful rose shaped flower made of Palm fronds and then he rode away. On that day when our family could have focused on “how the rain ruined the wedding” instead the story became about this beautiful, miraculous, unexpected gift.

Today we encounter Jesus at a wedding feast. The gospel of John which is the only gospel that contains this story, is full of signs and symbolism. Here, we hear about Jesus performing his first miraculous sign – these signs will identify him as one in whom God is revealed.

Water into Wine?... It is a strange sign, I think. Given all the need in the world it seems frivolous for Jesus to spend any of his time making wine just to extend a long wedding party longer. Why is John telling this story so early in his gospel? In the other gospels we would be hearing about events that seem much more substantial. In Matthew we would hear about Christ’s baptism. In Mark we might hear how Jesus healed a paralyzed man, then ate with some of the most despised people of his day – the tax collectors. In Luke we’d be hearing Jesus’ first sermon, where he announces his mission to “bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed.” But John tells us about Jesus making for a lot of fine wine for party-goers at a wedding in Cana. Why?

John tells this story to showcase the abundance of the gifts Jesus comes to give. Six 30-gallon containers of the best kind of wine! That's almost incomprehensible. And it is easy to miss this sign of abundance because many of us struggle with what it means to imagine abundance. We wrestle with notions of abundance simply because its opposite – scarcity – is foundational to our economy. We assume things will run out. We assume we'll need to buy more, and the price of whatever we buy will be influenced by the realities of a limited supply and demand. We don't really believe there is enough of what's most valuable in this world for everyone to have it.

Rev. Carla Pratt Keyes adds, "In addition, we are keenly aware we live in a world where the abundance of some people and the extravagance of some lifestyles contrast starkly with the poverty of other people. In some situations, the wealth of some actually depends upon the poverty of others – it's a system in which, in some way we all operate. Years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr., preached that 'God never intended for one group of people to live in superfluous inordinate wealth, while others live in abject deadening poverty.' This is another reason some of us struggle with what it means to enjoy abundance."

I guess the last reason I have trouble thinking about abundance as Christ exemplifies it in today's story is, in lean times, I have never experienced food and wine just appearing for human use. I'm sure John had to save his money and purchase his breakfast like the rest of us. Yet John acknowledges throughout his gospel that the abundance of Christ's gifts is never fully realized on earth. We might say in Jesus Christ; God's people have glimpsed God's intention . . . and there is nothing stingy about it! In gallons upon gallons of wine for a wedding . . . in another story of a boy's lunch of bread and fish transformed into enough to feed more than 5000 people . . . in a story at the end of the gospel about a net so full of fish the disciples couldn't lift it into their boat, John describes how Jesus has come to give people not just enough – but more than enough, an abundance of very good gifts. "I came so you can live life to the fullest," Jesus says in John's gospel; and, Christ's earliest disciples understood that receiving Christ's extravagant life was part of following him.

As we look closer this sign of God's abundance includes a lot of symbolism. Most everything means something in John's gospel.

Consider the exchange between Jesus and his mother – which may sound sort of harsh – it reveals something about the essence of God as a gift giver. Jesus was not beholden to his family and friends . . . or even to the needs of that wedding party host. Christ has these amazing gifts to give, and they're given when and because God is ready to give them – because God wants to give them. Of course, it turns out Mary is also in tune with God as she prepares to walk away and tells the workers to "do whatever he says," and Jesus does turn water into wine. Still, God's gifts are given at God's initiative, not human initiative. Christ's concern for others has no borders, and his abundance will not be confined or bought or preferentially given. We hear that in this story.

The water and its stone jar containers lead us into another symbol. These jars were most often used for the Jewish cleansing ritual. Part of what's fulfilled unexpectedly in Jesus is when the Messiah's time did come, it would come with extravagance just like this. Amos had prophesied that the mountains would drip wine and all the hills would flow with it. While flowing wine is not the best image for everyone, the intent is celebration! The intent is joy. Rev. Kathryn Huey writes, "Sometimes the church has forgotten that our Lord once attended a wedding feast and said yes to gladness and joy." Robert Brearley adds, "God does not want our religion to be too holy to be happy in." God's intent is a world where all can live life to the fullest. When God's realm is realized that's how it'll be.

Next, imagine the host of the wedding party. It was his responsibility to have everything that was needed for a multi-day celebration. In Bible times, wedding hosts would scrimp and save to provide for a family wedding and wine was expensive... And, in that culture, it would be shameful to run out of wine early. It would be hard for the host to show their face again if their wedding party ran dry.

We might reflect upon times we have worried about letting people down. Times we worried we didn't have enough, or that we weren't enough to cope with whatever an occasion demanded.

If you've ever felt that kind of fear or shame and escaped it, then you know how the host felt when those new jugs of wine appeared. He felt relief. Release. Reassurance. Gratitude. He was going to be able to do what he'd feared he could not do and do it even better than others. To feel that way is to feel some of the abundance Christ brings.

Lastly, wine. As I've said, it isn't always a good thing for everyone, but in the best cases, wine gladdens the heart. Think of how some of you feel drinking a nice glass of wine at the end of a hard day, or over a meal with someone you love. You relax into it. If wine is not good for you, think of hot chocolate after a walk in the snow. A tender touch from someone who cares about you. Belly laughs with a good friend. When you've rejoiced in any way like these you've experienced something of the abundance of Christ.

Part of the good news of this story, here at the start of John's gospel, is that Christ's glory can be revealed in the midst of an everyday event – a party, a meal, a human gathering. Jesus Christ can come to us with extravagant gifts that cheer us. And that is not frivolous. It's essential to the Christian life -- for you and me and all the people in every time and place who Christ came to bless.

Amen