

## Sign of Abundance

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As I spent time with our gospel scripture this week, which tells the story of the Wedding at Cana, I couldn't help but turn my thoughts to my own wedding plans. For those of you who may not have heard yet, Ryan and I got engaged in November, and we are now right into the throes of wedding planning. While many will say to you that your wedding day is all about you and your spouse-to-be, we have discovered that, while that may seem like the case at the beginning, our thoughts and concerns have quickly turned from ourselves to our guests. Especially around food and drink. For instance, do we want to offer only one vegetarian and one protein dish? Or do we want to spend \$3 more per guest in order to be able to offer two different protein dishes? And do we want that protein to be chicken and fish? Or do we want to spend a little more in order to offer some form of beef? And what kind of vegetables do we want on the side? And what kind of starch? And do we want to pay for the standard package where guests receive 2 glasses of wine at dinner, or do we want to bump it up to the premium package where they receive 3 glasses? We want our guests to feel taken care of, to enjoy themselves, to not feel limited in their food and drink options and consumption. While the day will ultimately be about our marriage, there is so much to consider in terms of our guests—hospitality is a big part of wedding planning.

In our scripture today we hear a story about a wedding where there is also a good deal of concern for the guests. Jesus, his mother, and his disciples are all attending a wedding. At this period in time, the bride and groom didn't head off on a honeymoon after being married, but hosted a seven day wedding celebration at the groom's home (a tradition I can safely say I am glad does not exist in our culture today). During this celebration at Cana, the wine runs out and Jesus' mother, approaches Jesus to tell him of this socially problematic situation because perhaps he can do something to help the bride and groom avoid the anxiety and shame that would accompany such a situation. Family honour was a very important aspect of the ancient world and to have dishonour brought onto your household would affect, not just the attitudes of your guests, but your social standing within other areas of the ancient world; your family position was one of many factors that determined where you, and by extension, your household, sat within the social stratification of the time. To run out of wine during a wedding feast wasn't a simple or laughable affair; it wasn't something that would make for an entertaining story some day in the future, taking everyone on an enjoyable nostalgic journey. In ancient times, having enough wine at your wedding showed a level of wealth and hospitality that influenced your social standing and

marked your household as honourable. This being the case, Jesus' response to his mother's concern with the wine is somewhat surprising—"what concern is that to you and me?" he asks, "my hour has not come." Now, we already know the ending to this story: the empty water pots are filled and the water is miraculously turned to wine, so it could be easy for us to skip over this somewhat confusing middle section—we already know that the celebration is saved and the joyous event continues.

But then we would miss the sign that this event points to.

The gospel of John tells of seven signs that Jesus performed throughout his ministry. John uses the word "signs" instead of the word "miracles"; it is a word that emphasizes the *significance* of the action rather than the marvel of it. John uses these signs to point beyond themselves to what is being revealed through them. They are not stories told to try gain people's interest through a rousing tale, but stories meant to help us better understand and believe by revealing to us the person of Jesus. During this time of Epiphany we focus on just that: the ways that the person of Jesus is revealed to us as the son of God, as both human and divine, as our way forward to new life, as a means of grace. Jesus' actions at the wedding in Cana are his first sign in the book of John. So how is turning water to wine a sign and not simply a gimmick to impress the disciples and the servants?

At this wedding, Jesus takes "six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification" and fills them to the brim with wine. That is, Jesus takes the old order, the old religion—empty and in need of revitalization—and provides abundance: full, unending vats of wine. There is reason to celebrate, there is reason to express joy: Jesus provides abundantly. The pots fulfill their new purpose: they no longer hold ritual water but fine wine for the wedding guests, provided by Jesus in order for the party to continue. Water to wine; vitality to the ancient religion.

But we still have to circle back to the question Jesus poses to his mother upon hearing about the lack of wine: "what concern is that to you and me?" Why this divine reluctance to step in and save the party? Certainly the lack of wine points to the possibility of many already drunken guests, making the need for even more wine rather frivolous and unnecessary. But, again, the family honour is at stake. Plus, Jesus isn't a dispenser of goods; he is not a convenience store or the LCBO where we go to grab another cask of wine. If that were the case, our beliefs would be corrupt with gluttony, and material desire. Perhaps we should read this reluctance as divine control of timing; Jesus says, "my hour has not yet come." There is a plan, and everyone must be patient as it unfolds. Jesus will wait for the inner call from God, not submit to human demands, even from his mother.

Yet just as Mary saw her son as one who could—and should—meet need, so do many followers of Jesus. Followers who understand fulfillment and the pouring out of

abundant blessings but who still must ask the question, “where is abundance in our lives?” As one commentator puts it, “We see a world in need, and we believe in one who claimed to bring abundant life to those in need. In a world where for so many there is no clean water—let alone fine wine—where is the extravagance of God? In a world where children play in bomb craters the size of thirty-gallon wine jugs, why the divine reluctance? In a world where desperate mothers must say to their small children, “We have no food,” why has the hour not yet come? No matter how we rationalize divine activity, we still want to tug at Jesus’ sleeve and say: “they have no wine.””<sup>1</sup> And maybe that’s the crux of it—while Jesus came to minister, to heal, to save, we are an intricate part of the story, too. We, the community of Christ, have a key role to play. Our questioning, our prodding, our pulling at the sleeve of Jesus and saying “they need more, we need more” helps to take the story from being one about a divine man to being about a *people* who follow in the steps of a divine man and believe that their collective efforts and use of spiritual gifts under the reign of a saving God can and will change the course of the world. We who come from places of abundance, who have more than we need—we have the gift to see scarcity and offer more.

Of course, this only works if we recognize what is revealed to us. The text suggests that our three-dimensional understanding of life in this world, with its painful limitations—poverty, disease, injustice, hunger—has been unpredictably invaded by grace and that when this happens, we may not recognize it.

Within our scripture, the chief steward recognizes the excellence of the wine when it is brought to him, but he does not know its source in Jesus, or its meaning as a sign pointing to God’s grace. We are often like that, recognizing good gifts without recognizing their source in the Creator’s love. We so often overlook the abundance that exists around us. And while there is merit in taking stock of what is missing, what is lacking, what needs replenishing and revitalized in our lives in order to make it better for the guests—that is, for our communities, our city, our world, and even within our own religion—there is also much to be said for taking time to truly open our eyes to God’s abundant grace and, like the disciples in today’s story, seeing that abundance and believing.

Christ’s signs point to grace. They point to an abundance of vitality, of goodness, of love. They reveal to us who Christ is. And it is our role to open ourselves to that revelation, abundance, grace; to recognize God’s good gifts around us; and to tug at the sleeve of Jesus when, in our seeing and recognition, we know we can do more to be a part of the story.

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Lakey Hess