

SEEING THE SIGNS OF ABUNDANCE

1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

Despite these pandemic days, I have had the great joy of officiating a few weddings over the past year and a half. Now, I was only ordained to ministry in 2018, so I've really only ever performed one wedding that wasn't contained under the Covid umbrella. But my experience officiating in this capacity certainly doesn't make being part of a wedding with Covid restrictions feel typical or even easy. There is so much more to consider with a wedding during a pandemic. I've done indoor weddings with limited guests all masked and distanced. I've done outdoor weddings without masks but distanced in a way that felt like some members of the wedding party were in a whole other location. But what is consistent with all these weddings was concern for the safety of the guests without compromising on the feeling of joy and celebration. The couples to be married were consistently concerned for how their guests, even the limited number of them, would feel. How would they be seated for the ceremony in a safe manner? How could they incorporate those who would have to watch the ceremony from home? How could the couple greet and thank their guests without hugs or handshakes or generally standing too close? How would everyone be seated for a meal so they weren't too close to those not in their household or bubble? How could a little extra fun be incorporated if dancing couldn't be part of the festivities? Despite these extra obstacles, we always made it through, and always with a deep sense of joy, gratitude, and sense of shared love within the gathered community—however that ended up looking.

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. 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 newly wedded couple 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. In ancient times, having enough wine and food at your wedding showed a level of wealth and, perhaps more so, 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 middle section and jump right to the happy ending—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 and 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. Which is interesting. When we think to Jesus and the actions he took within his ministry, so many of them are related to healing the broken, feeding the hungry, even raising the dead—all acts that helped to relieve suffering, to restore life, and bring wholeness. Which makes this first act or sign of turning water to wine appear to be a bit of an outlier. How is turning water to wine a sign and not simply a gimmick to impress the disciples and the servants? How is this an important part of the manifestation of Jesus when everything else we see and hear about Jesus points more to healing and wholeness than extravagance?

What confuses this further is that when Jesus' mother talks to him about the lack of wine, Jesus' response seems to take on air of indifference. He responds to his mother by asking: "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 that there are already many 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's not a convenience store or liquor store where we go to grab another cask of wine. If that were the case, our beliefs would be corrupt with gluttony and material

desire. We may question Jesus' choice to bring about such an extravagance, but we also question the reluctance to do so.

Just as Mary saw her son as one who could—and should—meet need, so do many of us as followers of Jesus. We may be followers who understand the goodness that comes from the pouring out of abundant blessings but we still must ask the question, “where is abundance in our lives; where is abundance in this world?” There is a world before us filled with great need, and we believe in Christ who claimed to bring abundant life to those in need. But in a world where there are Indigenous reserves that still have no clean running water—let alone fine wine—where is the extravagance of God? In a world with refugee camps where people must live in close quarters with chronic instability and debilitating poverty, why the divine reluctance? In a world where mothers are forced to say to their children, “we have no food,” why has the hour not yet come? When we see all this, even when we have trust in the actions of Jesus and the grace of God, we still want to tug at Jesus' sleeve and say, “they have no wine.”

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 loving direction 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 revitalization 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 church—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.

Of course, there's more to the story than just sharing abundance if we have it; the sign that Jesus points to is far more than a simple moral statement. To understand the sign we need to locate grace within the context. If we look forward in the gospel of John, we will see that abundance isn't something that stands on its own, it always leads to relationship, whether a new relationship or a restored one: A man who was ill his whole life finds healing and life eternal. A man who was blind finds a new community within Jesus' fold after having been driven away by his own community. Lazarus, who was dead, finds new life and abundance enjoyed at a table with Jesus and his sisters. Abundance is never about just you and Jesus. Jesus does not point to abundance as a sign of one's individual wealth and health and wholeness. Rather, it is about bringing us into relationships. When there is community ready to gather together the once rejected and abandoned, to bring its collective arms around one another and invite others into the fold, then there is true and abundant life. Where a life with abundance may have seemed lost forever, these blooming, meaningful, intentionally loving relationships prove that what was lost can be found.

And it means that abundance isn't about just one person. Keeping or hoarding abundance for yourself does not lead to true life, to true joy. Abundance should reorient your way of being in the world because abundance is best known and understood through relationship. In order to work the way it is meant to, it has to be experienced in relationship with others and with God. Receiving abundance isn't about a tally of all your good works, nor is receiving abundance about just sitting back and enjoying life for the sake of it. In receiving abundance we see the lack of it with others and do something about it. It is not for us to keep for ourselves. It is about using the gifts we have been given to do more for and with others. I love this quote from a Lutheran professor named Elisabeth Johnson, who teaches at a seminary in Cameroon; she says, "the experience of abundance, the realization of abundance, means being born again, and born into an abiding relationship with Jesus that believes the truth of "for God so loved the world" and will stop at nothing to make that happen."

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. Amen.