

John 2:1-11 ~ 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 TMB

*The Taste of Grace*

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany ~ Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

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The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

### ***Introduction to Text***

Put on your party clothes. We are about to crash the wedding reception that kicked off Jesus' ministry in the Gospel According to John. We are a long way from the banks of the River Jordan and the fiery rhetoric of John the Baptist that singed our eyebrows last Sunday. Remember the winnowing fork in Jesus' hand separating the wheat from the chaff? And all that talk of baptism with Spirit and fire? The only smoke in this story might be from tasting the smoked salmon hors d'oeuvres on the buffet table.

Today, for our our "first look" at Christ, in John's narrative world, we are handed a wine glass and a seat at the table and relax. Now is the time to drink in—perhaps even *taste*—the "grace upon grace" of the Word made flesh. John chooses to set Jesus' inaugural act in the context of joy, a celebration of union, where a new configuration of people become family by marriage. This is an occasion for merriment, beauty, and delight. In this story we learn: From his fullness we shall *all* receive glass upon glass.

I invite you to sit yourself down and open your eyes, for we too are meant to partake in this expansive wedding feast, that is about way more than two families coming together one day about 2000 years ago in Cana of Galilee. But let's start there. As it is written in John 2, beginning with verse 1.

### ***Sermon***

They ran out of wine. The story begins with a crisis at a common wedding and a mother's desire to solve it. And this is John's epiphany story, where Jesus' true identity is revealed. In the Gospel According to John there are no wisemen nor any birth story at all. This water to wine event also serves as John's transfiguration story: there is no mountain top vision of Jesus with Moses and Elijah in this gospel. This is *the* story where John is showing us how Jesus' glory was vividly revealed to his disciples. What do we see?

Let's begin with the presenting problem: the wine gave out before the party was over. It happens. It actually happened to us, at our eldest daughter, Emily and her husband Matt's, wedding reception. Ironically, this very story had been the gospel reading I had chosen for their wedding, and the text for my wedding sermon. By the time we got to their reception venue, all the wonderful wine that my son-in-law, had carefully selected had been consumed. For Matt, my new son-in-law, since he is a professional sommelier, this was an especially important aspect to their celebration. But upon our arrival at the reception, the wine had given out. Maybe we took too long with the pictures. Whatever the reason, since Jesus wasn't there in

person, a quick trip to liquor store by a couple of quick moving friends, saved the day for us.

But when the wine gave out at the wedding in Cana: *that* was a much bigger problem. For those servants and for that steward—running out of wine could have caused their dismissal or worse. What John doesn't spell out for us, is the sweat and anxiety pouring off them, as they filled those huge jars with water--desperate for this to work. In Jesus' culture, the chief steward was often an enslaved individual who was responsible for managing a feast. The steward would take the blame for this. So Jesus—and his mother, were not only keeping everyone at the wedding feast happy, they were also working together to help the servants out of a potentially life-threatening jam. Yes, here we see Jesus serving the servants as his first act while eating his first supper on the job.<sup>i</sup>

Does this remind you of something that Jesus did at his *last* supper with the twelve disciples in the upper room? Yes, it is in John's Gospel, where after their Last Supper together, Jesus takes a towel, kneels down and washes the disciples' feet, a servant's task, to show them what he really meant by "Love one another as I have loved you." To see Jesus more clearly, to taste the wine of "grace upon grace," to activate the Spirit among calls us to choose to serve. Like Jesus did, from the beginning to the end of his earthly ministry. Jesus opens our eyes to this truth between the raised glasses and the dancing at this wedding in Cana: we're in this together. It is by serving each other that we can turn scarcity into plenty, for all of us.

Although the story begins when the wine gave out, the story *turns*, when Jesus' mother shows her faith, "Do whatever he tells you." Even after Jesus' initial pushback, she is undaunted in her trust that Jesus will take care of the situation. The suspense grows when Jesus, who had the power to take care of this problem in any way he chose to, does not simply wave his hand or say a few words. Instead, he chooses to engage with common materials he has at hand: six empty jars, a ready supply of water, and servants eager to turn this situation around. What is John teaching us about Jesus in this story? What is Jesus revealing to us about God's will and God's way of choosing to work in and through us?

There is plenty of Gospel in this story, indeed John pours on *way more truth* in this story than we could possibly drink in here today. My challenge as a preacher is to choose what we need to hear; what we need to see, that will help us face whatever we brought here with us today. Here goes: While this story ends in abundance, delight, and wonder, it begins with scarcity, urgency, and panic. That's the part we get. I could talk about abundance and blessing, you might nod your head. But the scarcity, urgency, panic, the land where things keep giving out: that the part where we get. I'm here to tell you: That's the part that Jesus gets, too.

Thirty days into our partial government shutdown, our faith in our elected leaders may be giving out. Our faith in our justice system, when we look at who gets

incarcerated for what and why and how long, may be giving out, too. We may even be short on patience with God (if we are honest) when we see bad things, hard things happen to people we love or to us. Scarcity is all around us, in our community and beyond. We may be asking why the number of children who need the NOW (Nutrition Over Weekends) program here in our Marshfield community keeps growing. Or we look across the ocean and wonder why in the country of Yemen 85,000 children under the age of five have died from malnutrition because of the war there; or just on the West Coast of our own country, the children and teachers in the LA public school system have to try to learn in a classrooms where there are as many as 40 children to one teacher. Yes, we get scarcity.

Let's look at our story for a moment: How does the party go from running out of regular table wine, to overflowing with a ridiculous amount of amazing wine? We are talking about 600 - 900 bottles of wine. This is a story of almost cartoonish abundance, but it starts from a very real point of lack and deficit. In this story Jesus does not act alone. He activates the people and resources on hand to turn their situation from one of nothing into way more than they could possibly need or want.

Did you also notice in this story how the source of this amazing wine, the source of this grace upon grace was appreciated and welcomed by all, but only a few: the servants and the disciples and Jesus' mother, knew where it came from. Nor was it important to the story for everyone to know. Where the grace begins to appear is mysterious and subtle. Like the taste of fine wine.

From scarcity and panic, to abundance, surprise, and delight: This is a sign of what happens when the Spirit is at work animating, us to be Christ's body in the world, working for the healing of not just the nations, but the whole planet. This is the miraculous plenty that God is waiting to pour into our lives. Can you see the empty jars? The water that could become so much more?

This story also speaks to this truth: the full flavor of grace through Christ Jesus, flowers most fully when we are together. That's why God puts us in a church and calls us to invite others to this everlasting wedding, this communion of souls, and this foretaste of the messianic banquet. When we get together, whether in worship, or at tables in the Fellowship Hall, or even around tables in new groups, deepening friendships through "Food and Fellowship" groups: more than food, more than drink is being tasted here. Water becomes wine. Compassion grows and justice takes root.

One man, a prophet of our time whose legacy we celebrate tomorrow, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., got this. He did not let the overwhelming gut-wrenching hurt of segregation and racial prejudice, prevent him from seeing how even a taste of Divine Love and grace could move our country forward. Take the opportunity today or tomorrow to consider his words in context of our fight for justice today. The one the children helped us with speaks to the turn in our story, when he said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

Maybe you can't see the whole staircase today. You don't need to. Just find that first step. Jesus mother took a bold step. The servants took another. The steward took one more. Working together, in step with Jesus, what looked like the end of the party became something beyond what any one person could have imagined. Taking the step before we see the staircase: that's our call and our challenge.

An amazing poet, Mary Oliver, a favorite of mine, just died this past week at age 83. Her poems speak truth about God's love and grace in a way that no one else can. I want to give her the final words of my sermon today. Her poem titled, "LOGOS," which is the Greek word for WORD, or Christ, sings out the truth about the "Taste of Grace" we are given through Christ, one step, one word at a time:

Why wonder about the loaves and the fishes?  
 If you say the right words, the wine expands.  
 If you say them with love  
 and the felt ferocity of that love  
 and the felt necessity of that love  
 the fish explode into many.  
 Imagine him, speaking,  
 and don't worry about what is reality,  
 or what is plain, or what is mysterious.  
 If you were there, it was all those things.  
 If you can imagine it, it is all those things.  
 Eat, drink, be happy.  
 Accept the miracle.  
 Accept, too, each spoken word  
 spoken with love.<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Luke A. Powery, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year C, Volume 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 188.

<sup>ii</sup> Mary Oliver, "Logos," *Why I Wake Early: New Poems by Mary Oliver*, (Boston, MASS: Beacon Press, 2004), 40.