

January 16, 2022
Abundant Love
John 2:1–11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ² Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³ When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴ And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." ⁵ His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶ Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷ Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸ He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. ⁹ When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰ and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." ¹¹ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

Last February, Dave and I were at the tail end of our vacation when we received the call. At first, I didn't answer, after all, we were on vacation. Calling, was the HOA representative from the property management company. Curiosity finally got the best of me, and I checked my messages. The gist of the message was this: "I am calling you to inform you that you have water running out your front door." Much later, 1st floor neighbor shared the video of the waterfall at her front door. It was bad.

So began months of inconvenience and frustration as we tried to navigate insurance, restoration services, contractors, movers, and our HOA. We lived six weeks without a kitchen and three months in a hotel. Was it a big deal? It was to us. All the while I kept reminding myself that what we were experiencing were first world problems. Wha, wha, we live in a hotel where we get breakfast every morning and maid service when we want....wha, wha, wha...

Meanwhile, the death toll continued to rise from Covid, the healthcare system was taxed to the max, people were attacking one another over vaccinations and masks, lines for food were growing longer and longer, anxiety about paying rent and mortgages was skyrocketing, people were suffering from a year of isolation, and some communities were suffering disproportionately more than others.

My little problems were just that, petty, little, problems.

Now I know this may be offensive to some of you but running out of wine hardly seems like a problem that requires divine intervention. Jesus' mother thinks otherwise. At least, that is how it seems in this story. The big problem is that they have run out of wine – not that they have run out of food or that they have run out of medicine or that they have run out options for housing or that they are fearing for their lives. Running out of wine is the BIG problem and Jesus' mother wants him to fix it. Perhaps Jesus can help me find parking places, or my second home? Jesus, "They have no wine," she says. Even Jesus appears to be disgusted by her request.

With one reading, the story of Jesus' first miracle triggers question after question?

- Is it important that Jesus and his disciples are celebrating someone's marriage and feasting together?
- Why doesn't John call Jesus' mother by name? In the two places where he mentions Jesus' mother, he simple calls her the mother of Jesus.
- Why is Jesus' mother the one concerned about the wine? And why is running out of wine a big deal?
- Why does Jesus speak so harshly in response to her? Who calls their mother, "woman!?"
- And what the heck does, "My hour has not yet come," mean?
- Why does John include the detail about the jars containing water for the Jewish rites of purification? Is that an important detail?
- And holy cow! How much wine did they need? The story tells us that the transformation resulted in approximately 120 to 180 gallons of exquisite wine. Let's say it was 120 gallons – that is 50 cases – 600 bottles – and one ton of grapes!
- The head waiter has no idea where it comes from or why someone would serve the best last, but his questions go unanswered.
- And don't you wonder – did the bride and groom have a clue as to what is going on?

It's a great story because it is funny, shocking, prophetic, and offensive all that the same time. Here we have a story, that appears no where else in the gospels, written by an unknown author, to an unspecified community, some sixty plus years after the death of Jesus.

What we sometimes forget is that Christianity was born out of Judaism and for the first hundred years or so, one could be both Jewish and Christian. But then Judaism and Christianity began to separate into two distinct things – and in some cases, not all, the relationship between the two was exclusionary maybe even hostile. Some think that this gospel was born out of this tension.

The reason that I am going to the trouble of telling you that is because it is possible that this story is alluding to that tension and transition.

I have been struggling all week with the strangeness of this story. Why is it there? What does it mean? What is the gospel writer trying to communicate to his audience? What is the

message? I seriously doubt John is trying to tell us that Jesus literally turned 120 gallons of water into fine wine. In fact, the gospel writer of John pokes fun of people who take things literally. Look at the character of Nicodemus trying to figure out what Jesus is saying when he says, "You must be born again." Nicodemus scrunches his face up trying to imagine how someone could crawl back into their mother's womb. And then there is the woman that Jesus meets at the well. Jesus tells her about living water and she asks if he has a bucket to draw it up from the well. The fact that the amount of wine is so greatly exaggerated should be the first clue to us that John is not making a historical documentary. We cannot take it literally.

This is so much more than a "look what Jesus can do," story. There are themes of abundance and feasting and joy in the story that should be explored. And think about the wine. This story puts us at the intersection of Jewish waters of purification and the wine of Christian eucharist.¹ John Shelby Spong has written and lectured extensively on the fourth gospel, and he says that the mother of Jesus in this story functions as a symbol of Judaism. She appears again at the foot of the cross with one of the disciples that is identified as "the beloved disciple." John 19 reads, "²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." He concludes that the mother of Jesus, as the symbol of Judaism, becomes the mother of Christianity. He contends that the gospel writer is deeply Jewish and cut off from his Jewish roots and cut off from the synagogue. Mary stands at the transition point between Judaism and Christianity. Remember that John is not recording history – he is painting a narrative portrait for his own community at the end of the first century. And his community was living in that intersection. At the cross, the beloved disciple is the ideal disciple and symbolizes the Jesus movement. And what Jesus is saying is "behold" one another, Judaism is our mother.

AJ Levine, is a Jewish professor of the New Testament, and she makes it a point to call out Christian preachers and teachers on their antisemitism. Some make unsubstantiated claims about Judaism in the first century. Some preach that Jesus' New Covenant, cancels out the Mosaic Law, that Jesus supersedes Judaism. Worse yet, others call Jewish people "Christ killers." I'm sure I have been guilty in my preaching of antisemitism, and it pains me to confess that. And antisemitism is alive and well. Judaism is our mother, and we can never forget that. Jesus never stopped being Jewish.²

This important – because it would be easy to read this story and say that those pots are symbolic of all the religious rules of the Jews and Jewish legalism – and Jesus is the exceptionally better wine of grace..... I think we can talk about this story without denigrating our roots. We can talk about the shift from religious obligations to inner transformation and see that it has been God's desire all along.

¹ John Shelby Spong, lecture at Chautauqua Institute, "The Mother of Jesus: A Symbol of Judaism" 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lkx5kZe4ui0>

² Amy-Jill Levine, "Christian Privilege, Christian Fragility, and the Gospel of John," Lecture, Oct. 14, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYOFHZp16c4&t=3958s>

When I hear this story – I am reminded of other things Jesus says in the Gospel of John; things like “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10b) To the woman at the well he says, “The water that I will give will become in them a **spring** of water gushing up to eternal life.” (John 4:14) When Jesus fed the 5000 there was an abundance of bread left over.

Here is the good news – when we receive the wine and water and life and joy that Jesus is offering, we have enough and more. “I’ve got joy like a fountain,” we sing at camp – we are filled to overflowing! In the very first chapter of John we read, “From his **fullness** we have all received, grace upon grace.” (John 1:16)

It seems to me that we have a serious first world problem – it’s the problem of not enough. We will never have enough. We will never be rich enough. We will never be skinny enough. We will never be beautiful enough. We will never be smart enough. We will never be enough! And that is a problem! We jump on the ever-turning treadmill of trying to get and be enough, but we never arrive! And because we are not enough – we treat others with that same stinginess.

Dr. King understood this. He preached this. He said, “By opening our lives to God in Christ, we become new creatures. This experience, which Jesus spoke of as the new birth, is essential if we are to be transformed nonconformists . . . Only through an inner spiritual transformation do we gain the strength to fight vigorously the evils of the world in a humble and loving spirit.”

It is shocking when people get a taste of what truly satisfies – the good stuff – the radical, transformative, revolutionary love that Jesus reveals in his words and his life. And there is an abundance of that love, more than enough to share – more than enough to sustain us in the work of justice. More than enough. Amen.