

**A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes for
A Sermon for Every Sunday, 2019
John 2:1-11**

In today's story from the Gospel according to John, Jesus performs his first miraculous sign – a sign that identifies Jesus as the one in whom God is revealed.

It's such a strange sign! It seems almost frivolous, given all the need in the world (then and today) – frivolous for Jesus to spend any of his power turning water into wine! It makes you wonder what the gospel writer, John, was trying to emphasize about Jesus, by telling this story so early in his account of Christ's ministry. This early in the gospel according to Matthew? We'd be reading about Christ's baptism, or how the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness – serious stuff! This soon in Mark? We might hearing how Jesus healed a paralyzed man, then sat to share a meal with some of the most despised people of his day – the tax collectors. How 'bout Luke? We'd be hearing Christ's first sermon, where he announced his intention to bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. But John? John tells us about Jesus bringing wine to the party-goers for a wedding in Cana. Why does he tell this story?

He tells it 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 . . . I confess, as I thought about the extravagance of this miracle, I caught myself struggling with that – what it means even to *imagine abundance*. I think we all 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.

And I bet that you struggle (as I struggle) with notions of abundance and extravagance also because 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, and the need and the lack of resources in their lives. Oftentimes the wealth of some not only *differs from* the poverty of others; the wealth of some actually *depends upon* the poverty of others – on their willingness to work for very little and their powerlessness to change the systems that enslave them – systems that have, in some cases, enslaved them for centuries. I think of the United States, for instance, and its relationship to countries in Africa and the Caribbean – how *years* of abuse and enslavement are reflected in communities of wealth and poverty today. 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.” Yet that is what's happening still. Even those of us who have modest incomes here in the United States have much to learn about living simply, sharing what we have, and rectifying the wrongs from which we, too, have benefitted. The abundance of my lifestyle has come at some cost to others. That's another reason I struggle with what it means to enjoy abundance.

I guess the last reason I have trouble thinking about abundance as Christ brings it in today's story is that, in lean times, I have never experienced food and wine just appearing for human use. Even with the Lord's Supper we share in church; it doesn't magically appear! Members of our congregations buy the bread, or bake it with ingredients bought from the store. We buy our grape juice, too. \$3 a half-gallon! Somebody picked those grapes. Someone else worked the machine that smushed and processed the grapes into juice. Somebody else drove the many bottles to the cities in which we live. And when we prepare for communion in our congregations, we estimate how much we'll need, and have backup loaves and cups to make sure we won't run out. *Even in church* we don't expect God will provide magically for us. I guess it's a problem, hearing about any miracle: what could this mean for us today?

The gospel writer, John, was not free from earthly limitations. I'm sure he had to save his money and purchase his breakfast like the rest of us. John acknowledges throughout his gospel that the abundance of Christ's gifts is never fully realized on earth. There is still so much poverty and need. Yet, 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 could have life," Jesus says in this gospel. "Indeed, I came so you can live life to the fullest!" Christ's earliest disciples understood that receiving Christ's extravagant life was part of following him.

In the gospel according to John, there is a *lot* of symbolism. Most everything means something. What John emphasizes in this story reveals some important things about the gifts Jesus gives. Let's take a moment to examine the story more closely.

First of all, the exchange between Jesus and his mother – what can sound sort of harsh – reveals something essential about *the way* God's gifts come to us. Mary seems to think that because Jesus is her son, and she points out to him the need of a mutual friend, Jesus will feel obliged to help. (*I would feel obliged to help!*) But Jesus says, "Woman, what does that have to do with me? My time hasn't come yet!" And it's clear: Jesus was not beholden to his family and friends . . . or even to the needs of that particular time and place. 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. *They're given at God's initiative, not human initiative.*¹ Jesus showed compassion (time and again) to the people who came to him, who clearly needed him. And that's important. But his gifts were not *just* for the people who came to him and showed him their need. Throughout John's gospel we see how, from Christ's fullness, *the whole world* will receive grace upon grace. Christ's concern has no borders, and his abundance will not be confined or bought or preferentially given. We should hear that in this story.

¹ Fred Craddock, *John*, Knox Preaching Guides. p 24.

We might also notice in this story how Jesus turned water into wine in six stone water jars – what were most often used for the Jewish cleansing ritual. You can see how these old Jewish forms are given new content by Christ. Part of what’s continuous – and really, what’s fulfilled surprisingly in Jesus – is the hope that Jewish people had cherished for centuries, that 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. God’s people would rebuild ruined cities, plant vineyards, and drink their wine. Of course, there are warnings about drunkenness, too, and the sickness and violence that can result with an overindulgence or abuse of wine. Wine flowing isn’t the best image for everyone. But the intent is celebration! The intent is joy. God’s intent is a community where *all* the inhabitants have life and can live life to the fullest. When God’s realm is realized that’s how it’ll be.

Like I said before, I have never had wine just materialize when I wanted it. I have not experienced God’s abundance that way, and I bet you haven’t either. Yet we have at times experienced grace as abundant as multi-gallon jugs of wine. We have. And John’s story can remind us about that, too.

Imagine the host of that big 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 their family and friends what they wouldn’t drink themselves on a regular basis (wine was fairly expensive!) . . . And, in that culture, it would be shameful to run out of wine early. You couldn’t just say, “Party’s over!” and turn out the lights. This was a big deal. It would be hard for any host to show their face again, if their wedding party ran dry.

It makes me think of all the times I’ve worried about letting people down – particularly people I love. It makes me think about times I’ve worried I didn’t have enough, or that I *wasn’t* enough, to cope with whatever an occasion demanded. Think about work. Think about home. Think about times *you* have felt seriously afraid you’d be unable to do something people were counting on you to do – something that mattered. A time you felt ashamed of yourself and your inability to get it together.

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 meant to do (and had feared he couldn’t do). To feel that way is to feel some of the abundance Christ brings.

Or . . . imagine the disciples, who’d thrown their lot in with Jesus. Maybe they’d heard John the Baptist talking about him. They must’ve gotten *a feeling* upon meeting him. But really, I wonder what their friends and family said about their decision to follow this “Messiah.”

Have you ever started off down a path that you weren’t quite sure was the right path? Maybe you got to the point where you said, in a prayer (or to yourself, even), *I could really use a **sign** that I’m doing the right thing right now*. If you’ve ever felt that way,

then *gotten the sign*, you probably know how Christ's disciples felt after the wedding at Cana, when they saw how Jesus turned water into wine, and *believed in him*.

In the gospel according to John, signs are given as encouragement; they strengthen belief. John says at one point, after Christ's resurrection, that it's a special blessing to believe without seeing (because that's harder!). But often in John signs are given as a gift and a help. This was the first of Jesus' miraculous signs, and it helped his disciples to believe God would be revealed in him. If you've ever felt the confidence that comes from witnessing something you could only call *a sign* . . . you've felt something of Christ's abundance.

Lastly, wine. As I've said, it isn't always a good thing for people, but in the best cases, wine gladdens the heart. As the Psalm says, that's what God means wine to do.² Think of how 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 isn't good for you, think of other things. Hot chocolate after a walk in the snow. A tender touch from someone who cares about you. A belly laugh with a good friend. When you've rejoiced in anything like that, 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 of relief and certainty and gladness and community – gifts that *cheer us*, the way wine cheered the people at Cana. And that isn't frivolous. It's essential to the Christian life -- for you and me and all the people in every time and place that Jesus Christ came to bless.

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² Psalm 104.