

I.

When I was growing up, we would often go to my grandparents' house in South Carolina for a week or so in the summer time. And from an early age I would watch my perpetual-motion-grandmother move around the kitchen. At lunchtime on those humid southern summer days my grandmother would begin pulling things out of cupboards and the fridge until the kitchen table was piled with loaves of bread, pimento cheese, condiments, cold cuts, and any number of salty things. Enough to feed nine hungry cousins who had come in from the creek just long enough to demolish whatever food was set in front of them.

And as soon as lunch was over, grandma would begin working on dinner. By the time people began piling into the small kitchen, we had casserole dish after casserole dish squeezed on top of the stove, filled with squash and onions, green beans, field peas. We had chicken or ham, rolls, and sweet tea. The children pulled chairs up around the kitchen table and the adults would sit in the dining room and we would eat until each belly was full, our grandmother urging us to go back for seconds or thirds.

When I think about abundance I think about those meals. Feeling as if there was always enough for everyone. More than enough. My grandmother never counted heads before dinner and made one serving per person. And she never knew which friends or neighbors might show up around supper time. She just made a gracious plenty and then we sat down together.

II.

In a few weeks we will read from the Gospel of Luke, as Jesus' ministry begins with a sermon in the synagogue. But in the Gospel of John, that we focus on today, Jesus' ministry

begins at a wedding reception. It seems like an odd place for our Lord and Savior to begin his earthly ministry. But, for John, what happened there was a sign of what was to come.

In Cana, about nine-miles north of Nazareth, a wedding was no small affair. When one occurred, the whole village was invited. And when Jesus and his disciples arrived that day in the middle of the wedding reception, Jesus' mother quickly found him. "They've run out of wine," she told him. And then she gave him the look. You know that look. The one that says, "You're going to need to do something about this."

Jesus, likely tired from his walk to the party, asked her what she expects him to do. "Shouldn't we mind our own business?" he asked. "This isn't the right time." But without replying, Mary turned to the servants and told them to just follow his directions, sweeping off to comfort the embarrassed mother of the groom.

Maybe after standing for a minute and contemplating what the walk home would be like if he chose to do nothing, Jesus turned to ask the servants if there was any water nearby. And after they said yes, he told the servants to fill up the stone jars that were meant to hold water for purification rituals. Six stone jars that had been sitting in the corner. It must have taken a long time. For they each held thirty gallons of water. By the time the servants had filled them all to the brim—180 gallons of water in all, the guests were getting restless and both sets of parents of the new couple were wondering if they would ever recover from their mortification.

Jesus told the servants to draw some of the water out and take it to the chief steward. And then he turned back to his friends.

When the steward tasted the wine that the servants had brought him, he was overcome with relief. For the better part of the afternoon, he had been sure that they were all about to be

fired for their incompetence. How were they to know how much all the guests would drink? And he just knew that some had snuck in without bringing any sort of wedding gift, much less a bottle to share. Nevertheless, it had been their job to keep the food and wine well-stocked and they had failed. But now, there was a wine on his tongue much better than anything they had served so far. And with wonder he gasped aloud, “Who saves the best wine for last?”

III.

For the writer of John’s gospel, signs are important. Throughout his writings he includes seven of them. While in other gospels we hear about miracles, in John, we are told Jesus performed these signs. Because, according to John, the point of Jesus’s healings or his feeding of the five thousand, the purpose of walking on the water or raising Lazarus from the dead, isn’t to reverse or overcome a natural process. It isn’t even in order to inspire awe or wonder. No, for John each of these moments in Jesus’ ministry—these signs—point beyond themselves, revealing who Jesus was and what he had come to do. And as verse 11 of our scripture today says, the first sign in the gospel of John takes place here. At a wedding reception that has gone on for days. When Jesus turned the water into wine, John says he revealed his glory. And when his disciples saw it, John writes, they believed in him.

When Jesus first calls his disciples in John’s gospel he doesn’t say, “follow me,” he says, “come and see.” Come and see who I am. Come and see what I am about. Come and be witnesses to what I am about to do. Maybe in the moment Jesus turned water into wine, the disciples saw echoes of the old prophecies of the Messiah who was to come. Like in Isaiah 25 where the prophet writes, “On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he

will swallow up death forever.” When the Messiah comes, the disciples knew, there will be plenty. Which may not mean much when you have enough, but it feels like miraculous good news when you know how it feels to run out.

IV.

It seems to me that if we take this first sign in the Gospel of John seriously, it is about much more than Jesus making people happy at a party. It is even about more than Jesus trying to avoid getting into trouble with his mama. It is all about who Jesus is as the Messiah—the abundance and joy that he brings.

After all, Jesus makes way too much wine. He makes about the equivalent of 1,000 bottles in stone jars that had been meant to hold water for purification rites. The jars are filled to the brim with wine of the very best quality. A vintage that even makes the head steward sit up straighter and wonder aloud. It is as if Jesus is reminding us that in God’s kingdom there is more than enough to go around. And that no one should receive the dregs. While God’s love and grace had once been accessed through exacting purity tests and standards, now that same love and grace is about to overflow out of those old jars for everyone. So that any who want to drink of God’s goodness have enough to drink their fill.

In the same way, this miraculous sign from Jesus allows the party to continue. He turns people’s embarrassment into joy, their worry into wonder. It is as if Jesus is reminding us that in God’s kingdom the plain water of *our* lives can be transformed into something better when he shows up. Something rich and joyful. Something more powerful than our anxiety or our concern. We are no longer isolated in our own corners, but drawn back into the beloved community, into the banquet of God’s reign.

V.

At the end of the meals my grandmother made came the very best part. The part that you were allowed to enjoy after your plates had been cleaned and cleared. The pound cake. The bundt pan turned over to produce the perfect dessert and then the top coated in a thick, chocolate icing made by hand. Cousins would take turns scraping out the icing left in the hollow center when the cake had been sliced and handed out. The sweetest moment coming right at the end of the meal.

And maybe, in the end, that is the most important lesson we learn in this story of water turning into wine. Maybe this is the greatest sign of all. For in this act, right at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus shows us that the best is yet to come. While we might experience suffering or sacrifice, right here, in the beginning of his public ministry. In the very first sign of who he is and what he is about, Jesus is showing us how the story will end. Not with suffering or shame. But with joy, abundance, and miraculous surprise. Like pound cake at the end of a meal when you have already eaten your fill. It is as if he is telling us: “Don’t worry. I am saving the best for last.”

© 2022, Rev. Dr. Kristin Adkins Whitesides