

So here we are today, and for several Sundays to come, back for a visit in the Gospel of John. John, you will recall, is the Gospel that sort of stands to itself. The first three Gospels, called the synoptic Gospels, despite their individual differences, tend to see and tell the story of Jesus together. John, often called the Fourth Gospel, was written later and in a different place and context from the other three. Absent the spoken parables Jesus shares so easily in the other Gospels, John's unique stories about Jesus serve as something on the order of enacted parables; and his long, complex discourses, compared to the short, pithy sayings characteristic of the other Gospels, act more as a developed theology, composed after Christians had time to reflect further on just who this extraordinary one who had lived in their midst was. For this reason, where John begins the story is important. It speaks volumes about who he saw Jesus to be. Matthew, you will remember, inaugurates Jesus' public ministry with the Sermon on the Mount. Mark, with an exorcism. Luke, with a return to his home village. But John? John relates a story unique to him. Jesus attends a wedding and turns water into wine. It is, John says, a "sign". In order to understand its meaning, we need to use the peculiarities of the event to discover a more deeply significant truth about Jesus' identity and mission. What is the truth toward which the story points? What specifically does it say about Jesus?

If we are honest, we will acknowledge some level of discomfort with the story. Stories of Jesus healing the sick, casting out demons, and even stilling a storm at sea have within them a component of compassion for those who are suffering. But turning water into wine? Of course, we have sought to make ourselves comfortable with the story by reminding ourselves of the great importance of social customs in Jesus' day (as if social customs are not important in our own day). Given the great humiliation of running out of wine before the wedding festivities were half over (they lasted a week), Jesus was displaying, then, compassion for the embarrassed host. If that were the case though, why did he have to go to such extremes? 180 gallons of wine? That is a lot of wine by anyone's calculations.

Some have tried to minimize the amount of the wine in order to make the story more reasonable. Only the water that was drawn from the jars and served, they explain, was turned into wine. The rest of it, their creative interpretation goes, remained in the jars as nothing more than cool, clear water. Nothing in the story seems to indicate that was the case.

I recall visiting a church in Georgia one Sunday morning where the preacher of the day was chuckling over our discomfort with Jesus' actions. In the midst of one couple's argument over whether wine should be imbibed at all, the minister recalled that the man had been quick to point out in his own defense, "You know, the Bible says that Jesus drank wine." To which the woman had sniffed, "Yes, and I would have thought more of him if he hadn't!" Another woman, seeking to put her dis-ease to rest, reasoned, "The Bible says that Jesus changed the water into wine. It doesn't say he drank it." Case closed!

The decisions we make about alcoholic beverages do matter, but there is something more at stake here. What sign do we encounter in the story? What truth does it seek to impart to us about Jesus? And how can we move beyond our discomfort to get at that truth?

In Jesus we encounter abundant grace. John opens his Gospel with what may have been a familiar hymn of his day. The poetry with which his prologue celebrates the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us is superb. It sets themes that are sounded throughout as John unwinds his story of Jesus. It speaks of Jesus as Life, Light and the cohesive Word of God. It uses the word grace four times, the only times, interestingly enough, the word is used in John. Yet just as John moves into relating stories, words, and actions of Jesus that demonstrate that Jesus is indeed the source of abundant life and light in the darkness, he is unrelenting also in his effort to paint Jesus as evidence of God's grace. "From his fullness we have all received," John says in his prologue, "grace upon grace" (1:16). The very abundance of that grace is at the heart of our story today; and it is important than in an effort to make the story more palatable, we not rewrite or minimize the very points that give it meaning.

You have heard the story explained perhaps in light of the cult of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and ecstasy. Word actually circulated in Asia Minor, where, tradition holds, John's Gospel was written, that annually during the festival in his name, Dionysus miraculously changed three large sealed cauldrons of water into wine. The writer of John was probably aware of the story and influenced by the story, and that's okay. But in addition to Dionysus, the writer was even more influenced by Jewish tradition where wine symbolized the rich blessing of God. For the devout first century Jew, Luther Seminary professor David Lose explains, "wine isn't just a social lubricant, it's a sign of the harvest, of God's abundance, of joy and gladness and hospitality" [Working Preacher, Jan. 13, 2013]. The early rabbis sang with abandon about God's blessing of the abundant,

overflowing fruit of the vine. "There is not a vine in the land of Israel," one rabbi boasted, "whose harvesting does not require the labor of a whole town." Another explained his three-day absence from his job by saying, "My father left me a vine branch from which I harvested on the first day three hundred clusters, each yielding a barrel. On the second day, I cut three hundred clusters yielding half a barrel each. On the third day, the three hundred clusters produced one-third barrel each and I still left behind more than half of the crop." [TB Ketubot 111b]. Overflowing vines (and vats) were a sign of God's gracious blessing; and conversely, vines not producing and empty vats were a sign that God's blessing had departed.

The superabundance of water transformed into wine at the wedding feast, then, is a critical part of John's story. And so also, the superabundance of detail John utilizes in describing the surprisingly large number of surprisingly large containers that held the wine. No one, John is saying, had to go away thirsty, for there was overflowing abundance for any and all who came to the wedding and for all who come to Christ.

In Jesus God ushers in a new day. Hebrew scripture brims with the imagery of God's new age flowing with new and plentiful wine. Hosea, Jeremiah, Joel, and Amos all depict abundant, good wine as a sign of the joyous arrival of God's new age. Jesus' sign at the wedding, then, is more than the inaugural act of his ministry. It stands as the fulfillment of Israel's ancient hope. It is the inaugural act, the proclamation of God's reign.

Jesus' turning water into wine is one of John's enacted parables. It enacts Jesus' caution reported in Matthew, Mark, and Luke about putting new wine into old wineskins. We are prone to rush, unfortunately, to depict Jesus' act as a repudiation of Judaism. We should note, however, that the jars, prior to the servants filling them, were empty, waiting to be filled with God's joyous new gift. Jesus' miracle, Gail O'Day suggests, was "neither a rejection nor a replacement of the old, but the creation of something new in the midst of Judaism" [*New Interpreter's Bible*, IX, 537]. God's extension of grace toward us did not mean that someone else, namely the Jews, had to be cut off from grace, as if God lacks enough grace to go around. Directly to the contrary, we are owing to our Jewish cousins for their bountiful history with God before we ever came on the scene. And we are owing to God's presence in Christ that opened the circle of God's bounty to include even us.

"The gospel story of abundance," Walter Brueggemann tells us, asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being. The baptismal service declares that each of us has been miraculously loved into existence by God. And the story of abundance says that our lives will end in God, and that this well-being cannot be taken from us" [*Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope*, 72].

Or, as John puts it: "The Word became flesh and lived among us, and from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." Thanks be to God!