

C Lectionary 2 1.20.19

1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

Focus Statement: The nature of Jesus is fulfilling abundance

The church calendar worked out pretty well this year with Epiphany falling on a Sunday, because it means we get to hear all three of what are commonly thought of as the Great Epiphanies of Jesus' early ministry: the appearance of the star that led the Wise Men to Bethlehem, Jesus' baptism at the Jordan, and the miracle of water turned to wine at the wedding at Cana.

Since we're in the season of Epiphany, let's start with a quick refresher on what an Epiphany is. Epiphany is from the Greek ephiphania, which means manifestation or appearance. To "manifest" something is to make something clearly visible and understandable. Remember this definition because our hymn of the day today is Songs of Thankfulness and Praise, which is one of my favorite hymns but also seems to be an answer to the challenge, how many times can you work the word "manifest" into a song? If I counted correctly, the answer, according to hymnist Christopher Wordsworth, is eleven.

All this to say, the point of these epiphany stories is to reveal to us something about the nature of God, about who God is, as demonstrated by Jesus. The question this season invites us to ask this text this morning is, "what does Jesus turning water into wine reveal to us about who God is?" Keep this question in mind as we walk through the story.

First some background on first century wine and weddings. Scripture is filled with references to wine. An abundance of wine was frequently an example of God's blessings on

those who kept God's commandments. Psalm 104 talks about God giving "wine to gladden the hearts," and the prophet Isaiah spoke of day when God will "make a feast for all peoples... of well aged wine." So wine was celebratory, but wine was also practical.

Remember, this was the time before water treatment plants and water a lot of times was not actually safe to drink. Alcohol was created not for parties, but as a way to kill bacteria and make the water potable. Unlike today when water comes out of our taps more or less safe to drink, in the first century you had to drink wine or beer, because water could kill you.

And first century weddings involved a lot of wine! Like today, wedding receptions were gatherings of friends and family to celebrate the start of the new couple's life together.

Unlike today, these parties could last as long as a week. A week during which food and wine were expected to flow freely. This, obviously, could get very expensive. But a thing I learned while researching for this sermon was providing the food and wine was not solely responsibility of the groom. Guests were expected to bring gifts of food and wine to the wedding, to help the new couple get off to a good start. So running out of wine was a failure not of the groom alone, but of the community who failed to support the new couple adequately.

But, even if in reality the blame belonged to the community, in practice blame would fall squarely on the shoulders of the groom. For the rest of his life, this guy would be known as the one who didn't have enough wine at his wedding.

Enter Jesus. Or more precisely, enter Jesus' mother. Because when his mother pointed out to Jesus, "The wine has run out," he dismissed her. "My hour has not yet come." But she was undeterred, saying to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." And her trust was warranted as soon there was not just wine, but 120 to 150 gallons of wine. And not just any wine, the best wine. Both the amount and the quality vastly more than what was needed. Jesus did not just fill the community's lack and preserve the groom's pride; he exceeded it. A quantity and caliber well above requirement. A manifestation, if you will, a physical, tangible example of what John meant in chapter one when he said that from Jesus we have all received "grace upon grace."

The writer of John described Jesus turning water into wine as "the first of his signs... [in which he] revealed his glory." So getting back to our earlier question, what does this sign reveal to us about who God in Jesus is? God is a God of abundance. God does not just meet our needs, but exceeds them. God is extravagant and expansive in love for us. God gives us the best. While the community can, and will, fall short, God never will. When the prophets spoke of how God is preparing a feast for God's people, that feast is one where the wine never runs out, and just keeps getting better and better and better. At God's table there is not just enough, there is abundance for all.

I don't know about you, but that by itself is some pretty solid good news. The love of God is a font of blessing that never runs out, and only gets deeper, richer, and more abundant. Even when we fall short, God is there to fill in the gaps and provide everything we need. I could say Amen and sit down, and that would be enough. But there's more. Because for the

next six weeks we'll be reading parts of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. And the section we read today lets us see just one of the ways God provides this abundance of blessing is actually through the gathered community.

Bit of background on the church in Corinth. Corinth was a pretty diverse city, with a lot of different people from different places, experiences, skills, and income levels, and that diversity was represented in the church. Which for a while worked pretty well, but then, as people do, they started to bicker with one another about who was the most important. Those with money thought they should get more attention because they paid for the church, those who were gifted leaders thought they should get more, because they led the church, those who were skilled in maintenance thought they should get more, because they repaired the church, you see where this is going. So Paul wrote this letter to tell them, no, you all need each other. No skill or gift is more important than another, because all gifts and services are from the Holy Spirit and all can be used to build up the body of Christ.

And not just can all skills be used to build up the body of Christ, but this diversity of skills are what makes church work. Just think of our own congregation. Imagine if every single one of us were amazing craftspeople, but no one could balance a checkbook. Yeah, in theory we could have a really well-maintained building, but in practice we wouldn't be able to afford the supplies to repair it. Or if all of us were fiscal geniuses, but no one had any gifts in hospitality or welcome, no one would want to hang out with us. Or if we were super welcoming, but any time someone played the piano it sounded like cats dying. Or if everyone was in the choir but no one was ever there to listen to them. Actually, that last

one happens sometimes, and then I get a private concert, but I digress. The point is, it is this rich diversity of skills and gifts, all signs of the abundance of the Spirit, which make our community work. And not just work, but thrive. And not just thrive, but in fact become richer, deeper, and more abundant the more we are able to lean into this rich diversity of people and experiences.

Dear friends in Christ, it is in us, in the diversity of gifts and cares we bring, that the abundance of God is made manifest. We are examples of grace upon grace. Amen.