

John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. 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 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.' Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

SERMON: Offering abundance through defiance

We continue our series on the questions of Jesus with this story. It's easy to overlook the question here, and focus on what happens and why. In this time together, I want to look at the question and see how it leads into Jesus' invitation to abundant living.

Back in September, my first sermon in this series was on the question "What are you looking for?" from John chapter 1. There Jesus asks a straightforward question and gets a response from his earliest followers that doesn't quite fit: "where are you staying?". Today's question and response, just a chapter later in this gospel, remind me of that, where Jesus says "woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." and his Mother responds, not to Jesus, but to the servants - 'Do whatever he tells you.' At first glance there's a disconnect between what's said between Jesus and his mother.

But I think John uses this disconnect to again alert us that something new, something different is taking place here. At the end of this story, the author writes: “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.” (John 2:11)

Like we heard in the children’s story, signs are used to point the way to something. Signs themselves are not the destination, they show us the way. The author of this gospel doesn’t use the word miracles, he uses the term “signs”. These stories are to point the reader and listener of this text to something new, some place they haven’t gone before – a new way of living and being in the world that Jesus has come to show us. This first sign is the beginning of Jesus’ glory being revealed.

I love it that the gospel writer chose to put this story, one of a wedding feast, early in the gospel. This story, the first of Jesus signs in the gospel of John, doesn’t appear in any of the other gospels. Weddings are something that my family has been talking about a lot lately. I have lots of nieces and nephews, and in the past 5 or 6 years there’s been at least one wedding every year. In the next 12 months I’ll be helping to host two of them. My sons will be the bridegrooms. We’ve had countless conversations about the venue, the meal – a fancy sit down one for one of my sons, a potluck for the other, what to eat, drink. Weddings today take a lot of planning. When I was first married at the age of 23, the planning of our wedding involved some tense conversations. Ours was a German Catholic girl marrying a Lancaster county boy with deep Mennonite roots. I grew up in a household where wine and beer were a part of any festive occasion. Where two or more were gathered, the bottle was opened. It was unthinkable to celebrate without wine. For his family, not so much. It was a stretch, to say the least.... one they accommodated to, though not without some serious discomfort. Dancing – that was another story.

As I think back to my own wedding, and consider the ones ahead for my sons, I whisper a prayer of thanksgiving that at least our weddings are done all in one day. In Jesus’ day, weddings often went on for a week. Can you imagine? As an introvert I was so relieved to finally exit stage left and no longer be the focus of the party. 6, maybe 8 hours, that was plenty

of time to be the center of attention, to have my special day. I was so relieved to say thank you and good night. The party, a bonfire that is still talked about to this day, went on without us. But back then the party went on, and on...

Our story today begins with us learning that Jesus, his disciples, and his mother have all been invited to a wedding. Jesus is just one of the guests – no place of honor, no invitation to give a toast or offer a blessing, just one of the guys. Then we hear this interesting short conversation between Jesus and his mother. Mary brings to Jesus' attention the fact that there was no more wine at the wedding. New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright's translation reads like this:

*The wine ran out. Jesus's mother came over to him. "They haven't got any wine!" she said.
"Oh Mother!" replied Jesus. "What's that got to do with you and me? My time hasn't come yet." KNT*

Wright's translation infers a kind of playfulness between Jesus and his mother-like they knew something the others didn't. I don't know, perhaps Jesus had been practicing back home in Nazareth??? I think Wright's translation may have captured the essence of what's going on, because Mary's next statement seems to indicate that she knew Jesus was up to something.

His mother spoke to the servants. "Do whatever he tells you," she said.

That "something" begins in verse 6, which reads:

"Six stone water-jars were standing there, ready for use in the Jewish purification rites. Each held about twenty or thirty gallons." John 2:6

These jars contain clues to what the physical sign, what some might call the miracle, is directing us to. These were not jars for drinking water; they were jars set aside specifically for use in Jewish purification rites. Ritual purity was a very important part of the Jewish customs of the day. We see it when the Pharisees question Jesus about his disciples eating without

washing their hands in Mark's gospel . The Pharisees weren't thinking of physical cleanliness in that case, but religious purity.

In Mark, Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites when they ask this-not because Jesus was against personal hygiene, but because these purification rituals had become a way for some religious people to see themselves as more righteous than others, of imposing yet more rules and regulations that kept themselves separate from people that didn't practice the same rituals of purification.

Again and again, Jesus would challenge and cross these purity boundaries that the religious leaders thought kept them holy.

By turning water into wine, using ritual purity vessels, Jesus was transforming the ritual that these stone jars represented; a ritual that had previously been about segregation and separation; a ritual that had created an "us-versus-them" dynamic.¹

So what is this story, this sign of Jesus, pointing us towards?

In the gospel of John, the first miracle J performs is not healing of a leper, the recovery of sight to the blind or the raising of dead to life. No, J turns water into wine at a wedding banquet so the party can go on for days.

Our first glimpse of Jesus power shows his lavish efforts to celebrate life.

What concern is that to you and to me? He asks.

He doesn't appear eager to help. His question seems cold.

My time has not yet come.... It's a line that appears several times in John's gospel. Jesus is saying: it's not yet my time to die; not time for my glory to be revealed...It's not until much later in this book, John chapter 13, where Jesus realized his time had come for him to return to

¹ Hewett, Russ. 2016. *Six Stone Jars*. Blog: <http://www.meetingplace.church/blog/six-stone-jars>

his Father. But here we are – Jesus first public act – and already he’s stirring controversy, defying the norms of his day, the Pharisees and their laws and purity codes.²

And yet even with a somewhat cryptic response to his mother’s backhanded request, Jesus creates not only the best wine, but incredible amounts. 180 gallons! With this gesture he wipes away the entire Jewish purification ritual. He abolishes the Jewish ceremonial washings by using those water jars for a party. Jesus takes these empty ceremonial vessels and uses them for a party. He wants everyone to enjoy the fullness of life here and now. Throughout the gospels, Jesus repeatedly describes heaven as a wedding banquet, a party that never ends, with enough wine for everyone. He is determined that everyone have life, and “life to the full”. Look again at the text – notice how it tells us that the stone jars were filled to the brim. John gives us these details that point over and over to abundance.³

This miracle, though noticed by only a few, was for everyone. There was so much wine, 180 gallons worth - more than any wedding in Cana would have needed in those days. This miracle, like the feeding of the five thousand found later in John, is about having way more than is needed. Jesus lavishness seems extravagant, doesn’t it? Why so much more than is really needed? Why not be practical, Jesus? 180 gallons of wine, 12 baskets of broken pieces of bread picked up after he fed the 5,000? What are these signs pointing us towards?

Turning water into wine was more than just about celebration. It was providing for the practicalities of life too. Jesus is not an either/or type of Savior – not a “you’re in or you’re out” leader. In turning the water into wine he’s meeting the basic needs of those gathered in his midst. You see, back then water was not safe to drink. If you drank plain water, chances are you’d get sick, and sickness in those days often meant death. For day to day drinking, in Jesus time, Wine was mixed with water, usually about 20 parts water to 1 part wine. When celebrating, such as a Wedding feast, it was more like 3 parts water to 1 part wine. And back then wine often tasted pretty lousy.

² Colburn, Dave. *Jesus’ first miracles*. Restoration Road Church podcast: <https://www.buzzsprout.com/5988/61293>

³ Dear, John. 2004. *The Questions of Jesus*. Doubleday Books

Jesus is providing, in gracious, audacious, abundant ways, for this group of peasants gathered to celebrate. And he knows that offering such abundance is risky business. The Pharisees are sure to take notice of his taking those empty jars and having them brim full of wine. He willingly takes risks that will eventually lead to his death, but here, at the beginning of John, his first sign is that of celebration, providing not only for the needs of the people, but bringing forth the best wine – a sign of the extravagance that is ours for the asking.

Using jars that represented ritual purity at the expense of relationships, Jesus was seeking not to transform just water into wine, but to show us how abundance can replace scarcity, how he was not about following rules and laws that were dry and empty, but he was coming to offer something new. You see, in the story, Jesus didn't empty the jars...they were already empty. Jesus filled and transformed rituals that were based on "shoulds", rituals that led to being either in or out. His transforming water into wine speaks of celebration and abundance, more that we will ever need.

Can we hold onto that possibility for just a moment? Maybe taking in a deep breath and seeing what that feels like? Of Jesus' transforming the ordinary ingredients of the day into abundance and celebration - much more than is needed. (*Pause*). In weeks like this, I want to let that possibility settle into my bones. I need that reminder, to hear again of that sign of Jesus' power and willingness to be involved in the day to day living of those around him. How might that play out in our world today?

I saw abundance this week - I witnessed beauty and love, a breaking down of "who belongs" and who doesn't. On Friday evening I went, as did several others from this congregation, to the Shabbat service at Brit Shalom. the place was packed. Every chair filled, many standing along the walls. We came to claim love in abundance. We came to proclaim that God's love is for all. There, in that cramped room, were Jews, Christians, Muslims, gathered to proclaim that abundance.

That was my first Shabbat service, and I kept waiting for lament and grief, mourning of the injustices of the week to be cried out and railed against. But that never came. No, the service

was about remembering God's goodness and enduring love. It was a call to welcome the stranger. We stood, packed like sardines, and as psalm 133, which says: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity." was read, you know what I saw? I looked around and saw a man who looked like he might be Asian by birth, the little son on his shoulders playing with his father's yamelka, next to a woman with a headscarf, who was trying to figure out how to read this book that started at the back.

That was abundance. Jesus invites us to take these empty vessels of our lives and allow them to be filled to the brim by him, by love. He invites us to transformation, to moving from a place of scarcity and fear to one of having more than enough. Jesus came to show us another way of living. He gave us this sign, this turning gallons and gallons of water into wine, this taking vessels used only for rituals that were about rules, and using them to bring joy. What a gift of a story.

That's the Savior I want to follow. One who invites us to live out of abundance. Abundance that isn't found at first glance - abundance brought forth by Jesus capacity to love us all.

So I wonder -

Where is there space for transformation, for you, a vessel of the Holy, maybe one that feels empty at times, to be filled to the brim with life giving drink? Where are the empty spaces in your life waiting to experience abundance?

If these questions don't resonate, you might return to the prayer we prayed together in the lighting of the peace lamp. It might have some clues as to how to be filled with new wine. And so I offer these words and then invite you to hold them as we contemplate what might the Spirit be creating in and through us, during a few moments of holy silence.

So, I offer these words as a possible starting place:

Begin with gratitude...
let your gratitude grow into trust...
let your trust blossom into compassion...

let your compassion flourish into solidarity...
let your solidarity bear fruit in justice...
and when you are most challenged by the forces of injustice
most weary and discouraged,
return to gratitude that you are guided, accompanied, empowered and saved;
and entrust yourself to the undying love of God.