

**Party Time!**  
**Westminster Presbyterian Church**  
**Epiphany 2 - January 16, 2022**  
**The Rev. Dr. Sandy Selby**

*John 2:1-11 - On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. <sup>2</sup>Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. <sup>3</sup>When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." <sup>4</sup>And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." <sup>5</sup>His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." <sup>6</sup>Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. <sup>7</sup>Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. <sup>8</sup>He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. <sup>9</sup>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 <sup>10</sup>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." <sup>11</sup>Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*

My mother died more than 25 years ago, but she's still with me. Sometimes, something happens that reminds me of her, like hearing a particular song, or turn of phrase. At other times I'll think, "I wonder how Mom might have handled this." Sure, she had to nag me now and then, but I always knew she was there for me. I had a wonderful mother, and am blessed by that. Not everyone can say that of their mother, I know.

Jesus had a wonderful mother, too, though we only hear of her twice in John's gospel. John never calls her anything other than "the mother of Jesus." The first we learn of her in John's gospel is when she, Jesus, and his disciples show up at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. We think weddings are a big deal now. In those days they went on for a week, with lots of drinking and partying. At this particular wedding, there was so much partying that they ran out of wine only three days into the festivities---a grievous *faux pas* that would bring significant shame to the bridegroom. Knowing this, Mary says to Jesus, "They have no wine." Jesus takes care of the issue by turning water into wine. Not just *some* water, but well over a hundred gallons of it! And this isn't Boone's Farm Strawberry Hill, mind you, but a fine, top-shelf cabernet! The steward at the wedding is astounded by this. Not knowing what Jesus has done, he congratulates the bridegroom for saving the best wine for last!

John calls the turning of water into wine not a miracle but a "sign." This sign at Cana is the first of seven signs that appear in John's gospel, each pointing beyond what Jesus has done to what is being revealed about him through that sign. That's why today's story about the first of Jesus' signs is read during Epiphany, the liturgical season in which Christ's identity and mission are revealed.

In Hebrew scripture, an abundance of good wine is a symbol of the joyous arrival of God's new age, the fulfillment of all Creation in the Reign of God. So Jesus' action at the wedding feast at Cana is an initial sign that in him a new day has dawned. Jesus transforms the wedding party from an ordinary occasion into an extraordinary moment of revelation. The embarrassment of scarcity—the shame that the bridegroom has failed to provide enough wine—has become the joy of extravagant abundance. In turning the water into wine through the person and work of Jesus Christ, God's grace is overflowing from jars "*filled up to the brim,*" and this, says John, "*revealed Jesus' glory.*" Having witnessed this, "*his disciples believed in him.*"

But it only happened because Jesus had a nagging mother! We learn this in a curious exchange between Mary and Jesus at the beginning of the story. John tells us in verse 3, "*When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.'*" Seeming annoyed, Jesus replies, "*Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.*" In contemporary language: "What's it to us, Mom? Not our problem! I have more important things to do!" Doesn't sound much like Jesus to me!

Some commentators suggest that the key to understanding this puzzling exchange between mother and son is in Jesus' statement that "*his hour has not yet come.*" The timing just isn't right for him to reveal who he is, by what he does. This is, after all, Jesus' first public appearance after calling his disciples. Maybe he wants to fly below the radar for awhile. But Mary won't quit. Turning to the servants she tells them, "*Do whatever he tells you,*" almost daring Jesus to act. So he does, ordering the servants to fill six stone water jars, each with twenty or thirty gallons of water that, through him, become fine wine. A situation of scarcity has been transformed into one of extravagant abundance. Jesus has saved the day, and there is joy and celebration in Cana! Party time!

But this "sign" that Jesus gives, revealing an epiphany of abundance, is also puzzling. If Jesus has the power of divine generosity, abundance, and grace that would turn water into not only wine, but *vintage* wine, why would he hesitate to use that power? It was only after his mother's urging that he decided to use his power at the wedding at Cana. He continued to do so on countless other occasions during his ministry.

But that was 2,000 years ago. It can be disconcerting to read this glorious gospel lesson about the abundance of God's grace when we know of so many situations of scarcity around us, today. If God, working through Jesus, can turn water into wine, why doesn't God eliminate poverty? Why doesn't God give homeless people a roof over their heads? And for that matter, why doesn't God get rid of COVID? Is God indifferent to scarcity and suffering, just as Jesus initially seemed indifferent to a situation of scarcity when they ran out of wine at the wedding?

And here, perhaps, lies a clue to why John chose to include the strange conversation between a mother and her son in his story about the wedding. Maybe God *does* need to be nudged, even nagged, now and then. When Mary told the servant to do whatever Jesus told him to do, she did this with the knowledge that Jesus had the complete freedom to make that choice. Her statement to the servant was not one of compulsion, but of trust. She didn't argue with Jesus when he said, "what's it to us that they ran out of wine?" She simply trusted that, in his own way, Jesus would do something about it. Thing is, Mary's gentle nudge to her son not only prompted his act of

generosity, it also, in turn, opened the disciples' hearts and minds to believe that in Jesus Christ the very glory of God had been revealed!

Mary could nag Jesus she was his mother, and she was right there with him. We can give him a nudge, too. It's called prayer. Our prayers make a difference not only for us, and for the people for whom we pray. Our prayers make a difference to God. I like the way the Methodist theologian Marjorie Suchocki states it:

What if prayer increases the effectiveness of God's work with the world? God's invitation to us to pray—indeed, God's gracious command to pray—suggests the possibility that our prayers make a difference to God, and therefore might possibly make a difference to what God can do in the world...God works with the world as it is in order to bring it to where it can be.<sup>1</sup>

Like Mary, we can nudge God to bring God's extravagant grace to those in need. And like the servants at the wedding in Cana who obeyed Jesus' command to fill the stone jars with water, we can participate in God's work of abundance by being obedient, working alongside Jesus in whatever way we can to address situations of scarcity—and there are many situations of scarcity around us, some close by. Half the children in Akron live in poverty, many of them within a few miles of this church.

There are other forms of scarcity that demand our attention. One of the basic questions we face in life is, "What is enough?" Some of us, by the world's standards, have everything we need, and then some. But we wonder if it's enough. The voices of our culture teach us in ways both strident and subliminal to see the world through a lens of scarcity, telling us that nothing will ever be enough. What matters, those voices tell us, is our material wealth and security. When we begin to view life through the lens of scarcity, it doesn't take long for that lens to blind us to everything but our own personal needs. What we don't realize is how spiritually impoverished our lives become when we are captive to our crippling fear of not being in control, of not having enough.

What is revealed in the story of the wedding at Cana is that we *do* have enough. Through God's generosity and abundance, we have what the Benedictines call "sufficiency." In God, in a real and deep sense, we have enough.

Thank God Jesus had a nagging mother who trusted him to reveal his glory in a work of divine generosity! Thank God for the servants who listened to what Jesus said and in their obedience participated in transforming an ordinary situation of social embarrassment into an extraordinary celebration of God's overflowing grace! Thank God for the disciples who saw what happened, understood what this sign meant, and believed. Believed that in Jesus, as John writes in his first chapter, "*the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth*" (Jn 1:14).

"*They believed.*" What does that mean for them, for us? The Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff describes it this way:

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Suchocki, *In God's Presence: Theological Reflections on Prayer* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1996), 18-19.

To say “I believe in God” means that there is Someone who surrounds me, embraces me everywhere, and loves me, Someone who knows me better than I do myself, deep down in my heart, where not even my beloved can reach, Someone who knows the secret of all mysteries and where all roads lead. I am not alone in this open universe with all my questions for which no one offers me a satisfactory answer. That Someone is with me, and exists for me, and I exist for that Someone and in that Someone’s presence. Believing in God...makes us more ourselves and empowers our humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus changing water to wine is a sign that in God there is an extravagant abundance of grace that is within and around us to sustain us through the joys and sorrows of this life. As Boff says, “There is Someone who surrounds me, embraces me everywhere, and loves me...and empowers our humanity.” Our humanity that calls us to service, in the name of Christ.

Praise God for that! To a society that struggles with the question “What is enough?” Psalm 34 gives us the answer in just one verse, “Live in awe of God, and you will lack nothing.”<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), xv–xvi.

<sup>3</sup>Psalm 34:9, in *That God May Be Glorified: Liturgy of the Hours, an Inclusive Language Setting* (Erie: Benedictine Systems of Erie, 1998), 331.