

Isaiah 62:1-5
Psalm 36:5-10
I Corinthians 12:1-11
John 2:1-11

Today is the Second Sunday after the Epiphany. There are eight Sundays in the season of the Epiphany. It takes us right up to Shrove Tuesday and the following day is Ash Wednesday...the official beginning of Lent. There are multiple seasons of Jesus' life and ministry as we go through the calendar year. Each season is designed to reveal to us something about Jesus or provide us with an opportunity to experience Jesus in a novel and revealing way no matter how long we have been practicing the faith. As we walk through the calendar year with Jesus after his arrival on Christmas Day, we discover what kind of ministry he will have and what the purpose of his ministry is. There are any number of revelations about him as we go along. And no matter how long we have been practicing this faith or how arduously we have studied the life and works of Jesus of Nazareth, there seems always to be more to learn...always more to be revealed to us...always more to be understood by us.

One of the first things we learn about Jesus is that he is a king of a different type than any other kings we've ever known about in history or during our own lifetimes. His divinity is not revealed in a high profile place like Rome. It is revealed in 'out-of-the-way' places like his birthplace in Bethlehem or his baptism in the Jordan River or in his first miracle at a wedding in the obscure little village of Cana...which is not in Judea, by the way, but in Galilee which was known for its thieves, rebels, and Gentiles. All these are places are off the beaten track and not necessarily known in the larger world. They are places that command little or no public interest in the territories occupied by Rome. They are quiet little communities of no real consequence to the rest of the known world. And yet the most powerful and far-reaching human experiences that have ever happened, occurred in these places. Two thousand years later, we still talk about these quiet little places simply because of one person...Jesus...and all that he did and all that he showed us about who he was and who God is.

After Jesus' baptism and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon him in the form of a dove, he withdrew to the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. He must have still been grieving the beheading of John the Baptist, the one who knew who he was, and he found himself in the wilderness doing battle with Satan himself. He emerged victorious from that battle and when we catch up with him today, he is at a wedding with his mother in the little town of Cana. It's hard to know how all these most recent events might have affected him emotionally.

Sometimes we lose sight of the fact that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine and so sometimes struggled with strong emotions just like we do. So when his mother asks him to do a favor for the bride and groom, he's pretty short with her...almost rude! To understand the magnitude of the request his mother is making of him, it's important to understand something about the wedding customs in first century Cana.

It was expected that everyone in the town would be invited to the wedding. And it was also customary for them to bring food and wine with them to help the newly married couple and their families celebrate the beginning of a new family, but the majority of food and drink was supplied by the families of the bride and groom even though the rules of hospitality required the whole community to support the new couple in this way. If they were running out of wine, was this family being short-changed in some way? Was the community failing to support them as they were expected to do? Those same rules of hospitality required that the bride and groom and their families made sure they themselves had provided enough for everyone. Wedding celebrations could go on for several days, so it was a matter not only of good manners, but significant importance that these rules of hospitality were fulfilled. It was with shame and embarrassment that any guest at a wedding should leave hungry or go without something they needed. Given the climate, the lack of clean water, the large number of guests, and the sustained duration of ancient wedding feasts, the lack of wine at this wedding was a serious problem. The inability to provide what the guests needed was a failure in hospitality that would bring shame on the wedding hosts.

Consequently, Mary urges Jesus to keep this family from being publicly humiliated by running out of wine. She wants him to save them in a most tangible way. But when she asks him to help them, he blows her off. "Woman," he says, "what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come." In other words, this is not our problem, Mother, and it's not time yet for me to begin my ministry! Do you suppose Jesus didn't feel ready to start his ministry? Given the emotional strain of what he had been through with his own baptism, with the beheading of John the Baptist, and with his 40-day wrestle with Satan in the wilderness, we can understand why he might be reluctant to step out into his real mission. But Mary rather overlooks Jesus' rebuff to her and says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

I wonder what she saw in that moment. What had Jesus revealed to her up to that point that would cause her to believe that such a miracle was possible from him? How did she know that this was the time for revelation, the event of Epiphany? It is more than poignant that the mother of Jesus brackets his life and surrounds Jesus' earthly ministry. She was there when he was born; she was there when he performed his first miracle; and she was there when he relinquished his earthly life on the cross.

Jesus must have changed his mind because without any further refusal, Jesus tells the servants to fill the six large jars that were set aside for the Jewish rites of purification. Each one of them held 20-30 gallons of water. When they were filled, Jesus asked them to draw some out and take it to the chief steward which they did. The water had become wine and the chief steward had no idea where it had come from or why it was of such high quality. He took it to the bridegroom and explained that no one saved the best wine for last! You're supposed to serve the good wine first; then when everyone has become a little drunk, you can serve the more inferior wine. Jesus, however, had saved the best for last! Had Jesus not intervened the young couple would have started their marriage journey badly. They would've been shamed and they would have been the talk of the town by not providing enough wine. Jesus literally saved them. Instead, they began their married life with the miracle provided by Jesus.

This story leads us to expect surprisingly good and abundant things to come as Jesus begins his ministry. Starting the story with a provision of wine at a wedding feast, we can see Jesus' mission as continuing God's work in the world that provides hospitality and a space of belonging outside of the existing honor/shame structure. Jesus is not interested in shaming anyone or excluding anyone. That's not the way Jesus works. Although we sometimes forget that we are feeling ashamed of ourselves. We tend to think Jesus is seeing us the same way; when, in fact, Jesus is the provider of grace...grace that covers all our faults and provides us with abundant, not constricted, life.

Jesus had come not only to change water into wine, but to bring abundant life and he demonstrated that in the abundant wine which was between 120 and 180 gallons! Not only was it abundant life, but it was high quality life as well. What Jesus had created was far superior to what had been previously served. This was not the common practice to be sure!! It's not an accident that this even happened in the context of a wedding. God's relationship with Israel has historically been based on the wedding covenant. The implication in providing the high quality wine last and providing it for everyone is that Jesus had saved the best life for last and that God's abundant life is meant for everyone to enjoy...not just Israel. We might expect important guests to have inside information about where this good and abundant wine came from, but in fact **it is the servants** who get a sneak peek at Jesus' glory in this story and knew the inside information about how it had come about.

The custom in those days was that food and wine were not served indiscriminately to the guests sitting at the same table. It was based on their social status. Some guests got the cheapest wine — a mixture of wine, vinegar, and water — like the kind Jesus was offered on the cross (Luke 23:36), while others drank grand reserve. The good news is that Jesus' wine is

for **everybody**. Even though the marriage covenant implies the relationship just between God and Israel, everyone at this wedding got high quality wine. The implication is that God's abundant grace is for everyone, not just those with a special and elite relationship with God. The abundance of wine and saving the good wine for last draws upon this imagery of eschatological hope that is often coupled with messianic expectations.

What we all know is that abundant life does not mean that life will be easy; it means that Jesus covers us with enough grace to address any situation that might arise. It means that the grace Jesus provides is more than sufficient to provide what we need where and when we fall short. And that grace gives us joy even amid sorrow and struggle because Jesus is with us.

The liberating news in this gospel passage is that the Reign of God has gotten rid of all hierarchies. "Epiphany" is the manifestation of "one of us," a Nazarene who attends weddings, who celebrates life in togetherness. Jesus is showing us God's glory, God's sense of humor, God's nearness, mingling. God is not an absentee landlord, the metaphysical god of the philosophers, the never-present father. No, Jesus will never say we are "too close for comfort." In fact, it would be safe to say that Jesus can't get enough of us!!

It's one thing to say, "Jesus is the source of grace." It's quite another to have an experience of it. So much of our preaching tends toward telling people *about* Jesus. What if in the season of Epiphany, we commit to creating experiences of Jesus so that there can be no doubt that Christmas was real? Do you suppose that Jesus is all around us and we just don't 'see' him or 'feel his presence?' How would our experience of grace and God's peace be different if we truly experienced it? How would our sharing of the gospel be different if we were sharing something we had lived through? How 'real' would it become if it were not theoretical?

What would the wine taste like if it seemed to us to be real?

God's amazing grace is personified in Jesus Christ. And this is the season of revelation.

Let's don't miss a thing!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.