

“A Sermon about Weddings, Wine, and Weary Souls”
John 1:35-51
January 7, 2018

The Gospel of John opens up with lyrical poetry that has been described by many scholars as one of the most profound passages in the Bible. Starting out with “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” it goes on to proclaim that “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” (John 1:1, 4a) It’s on this premise that John’s Gospel is built. One might even say that the rest of the Gospel is simply commentary offering supporting evidence that God became a common, ordinary human being in the person of Jesus Christ. The Gospel writer never describes the wonders that Jesus performs as miracles, but instead, as signs. Signs which are recorded by the writer for the sole purpose of pointing to Jesus as the “Word become flesh.”

Which brings us to this morning’s text: the first sign and the first public act of Jesus – turning water into wine at a wedding. Compared to the other Gospels, it’s a rather mundane beginning to his ministry. Mark’s Gospel kicks off with an exorcism. Mathew offers us the Sermon on the Mount. And Luke describes Jesus preaching a sermon which so enraged his audience that they tried to execute him then and there. But John, in comparison, records what seems to be little more than a magic trick that will have no far-reaching impact. Just a local wedding that ran out of wine.

Unlike today’s wedding celebrations, which may last a few hours at a rented reception hall, wedding feasts in first-century Palestine took place in the home of the groom and were known to last several days, with guests consuming large amounts of food and wine between the music and dancing.

But in this morning’s wedding, the unthinkable happened: to the shame and disgrace of the host, at some point during the festivities, the wine ran out. What could possibly have happened?

It may have been the host’s fault. He may have underestimated the amount of wine that would be needed for the number of guests who were expected to attend. If so, it would have been a costly miscalculation, causing him to appear stingy and tightfisted.

But some Bible scholars think that the source of the problem may have actually been Jesus, his disciples, and others like them. At least one Bible commentary says that, according to the prevailing etiquette of the time, guests were expected to bring their own wine. But Jesus and his disciples, who were voluntarily poor and more than likely wouldn’t have had the money to bring wine for the festivities, very well may have helped themselves to the wine supply without contributing to it.

Regardless of whether it was the fault of the host and wedding planner or the fault of Jesus and his disciples, the problem was the same. The wine had run out, and the wedding feast was on the brink of disaster. The news would have quickly spread from the kitchen help to the women who remained behind the scenes somewhere apart from the main activities of the celebration. Mary, upon hearing the news, scurried off to Jesus, who, after a bit of back-and-forth banter with his mother, agreed to do something about the situation.

And after receiving instructions from Mary to do whatever Jesus said, the servants grabbed six water jugs, each of which, the Gospel writer makes a point of telling us, had a twenty- to thirty-gallon capacity. Jesus told the servants to fill them with water and to go serve it to an important dignitary at the wedding feast. And after they did, this VIP guest proclaimed it to be the best-tasting wine that had yet been served.

As noteworthy as it may be that Jesus could transform water into wine, this story is about more than just that. It’s a story about grace, and what grace looks like and tastes like. It’s a story that tells us if you could taste God’s grace, it would taste better than anything that had ever touched your lips. And it’s a story that tells us that there’s nothing stingy about God’s grace. God’s grace is abundant. It’s like 20-30 gallons – or more than a thousand bottles – of the best-tasting wine you could imagine, when you thought you had hit the bottom of the barrel and drained it dry.

Sometimes we find ourselves at the bottom of the barrel, so to speak. We don’t have anything

more to offer and we're running on empty. Like this morning's wedding host, who maybe didn't account for enough wine, our feelings of emptiness and exhaustion might be our own fault. We may have overextended ourselves with too many irons in the fire. We stink at saying no, so instead, we say yes until we burn out and develop resentments.

Or our emptiness may not be our fault at all. Like Jesus and his disciples, who may have arrived at the event and helped themselves to the festivity's wine supply without making any contributions towards it, our exhaustion may be the result of other people in our lives who take more from us than we have to give. These may be good people, people we want to help, but people who, nevertheless, suck the very life out of us until our spirits are withered up and dry.

Whatever the situation, the problem is the same: we have run out of that which gives us joy and we feel as if we are on the brink of disaster. The rest of the world continues to enjoy the party and have not so much as taken notice of the signs of our impending meltdown. But if something doesn't happen soon, we are going to go into a complete shut down and it's not going to be pretty when we do.

But if we just open our eyes and look around us, we might discover abundant grace that overflows into our lives, rescuing us from our certain ruin. And we will more than likely discover that grace, not in the hallowed halls of a cathedral, nor the eloquent words of a sermon, nor even in the breathtaking anthem of a 100-voice choir. If we look for it, we will find abundant grace in the common, ordinary stuff of life.

One day in a busy Washington D.C. Metro station, there was a man with an open violin case in front of him, who played his fiddle for anyone who passed by. Quite a few children and young people stopped and stared, but they were quickly hustled off by their parents. About half a dozen people stayed for a minute or two before moving on to catch their train. A couple of dozen people threw money into the open violin case. And after a while, the violinist had collected a total of \$32.17.

But the musician in question turned out to be the world renowned violinist Joshua Bell. Three weeks earlier he had played to a packed house in Boston where tickets for the good seats went for \$100 a pop. Even the cheap seats cost more than what Bell had collected in the subway station that day. Unbeknownst to the distracted passersby, Bell was playing some of the most difficult and intricate pieces ever composed for the violin, and he played them with not only the world-class skill that he possesses but he played them on a Stradivarius violin worth \$3.5 million. The whole stunt had been orchestrated by The Washington Post to see if anyone would notice. No one truly did, except perhaps for a few children who sensed something was up.

Too often in life we don't realize that abundant grace is right in front of us in the activities of everyday life: in a crowded subway station, in a local wedding celebration, in an after-worship potluck social, or in simply using the correct pronouns of the person with whom you are engaged in conversation. Jesus is present in the simple things of life.

So the question for all of us is: are we well? Is it well with our soul, or are we running on empty? And if we find ourselves at the bottom of the barrel, where are we looking for our salvation? God's abundant grace is available for everyone. But we may be looking in the wrong place for it. It might be right under our nose in the common stuff of life. All we need to do is open our eyes and then do what Jesus tells us to do.

Do you hear his words? "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, ... and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28-29) Amen.