

ABUNDANCE

1CORINTHIANS 12:1-11; JOHN 2:1-11

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Last week we said Epiphany, January 6, is the festival of the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus. The festival celebrates that Jesus comes not just to the Jewish world, the world of his own people, but all the world represented by three kings from distant lands.

The lectionary committee, the group that selects the Scripture readings for each Sunday, just two weeks after the festival of Epiphany gives us this amazing little miracle from John's Gospel.

The story of Jesus turning water into wine signals that with Jesus' appearance the world is now very different, the rules have changed. This is a story that can transform your life.

John's Gospel says Jesus entered the world to rescue those who were lost. What I want to say today is that the miracle at the wedding can help us find our way like a compass—individually and as a congregation—as we enter a new year.

There is no doubt about the difficulty getting a handle on this story. What are we to make of Jesus' exchange with his mother? Are they annoyed with each other? Is she telling us something the two of them know but he's unwilling to admit?

And what of his response? Is he rejecting her: her right to make demands on him, their relationship itself? Nor does the miracle fit nicely into a little box of historical meaning. At no point are we *told* Jesus has turned the water to wine. The steward knows this is good wine but has no idea where it came from. Nor do the wedding guests know where the wine came from. Only the disciples. What is the point of this convoluted little tale?

Some interpreters insist the only way to make sense of it is to read it as symbolic code. Jesus' mother represents the church, the new Israel; the wedding itself a new age in Israel's history. Turning the water of purification into wine is a rejection of Jewish rites.

While none of these are unreasonable conclusions, to make the story an allegory diminishes its relevance and power as scholarship-laden exegesis often does.

Rather, what I'm saying is that this story marks the start of the era of God's unimaginable generosity offered in Jesus Christ. You see prior to this story the world operated on the old 'eye for an eye,' 'fee for service' system of living. After Cana, the old spiritual economy is bankrupt. A new, more valuable gold standard has become the measure for living.

There is no small hint of Easter in this story of Jesus' first miracle. It occurred on the third day (Jesus rose on the third day after his death). The jars are filled to the brim.

There is no cautious, careful restraint here. Jesus just shows up at the wedding and whamo there is this miraculous outpouring of abundance.

I agree with one commentator who says: we are likely to be troubled by this miracle not because we're modern, sophisticated and scientific but because we're careful, cautious and restrained.^[i]

We don't make big moves in life. We don't ask big things of God. I have had more than one conversation over the years about prayer in which someone says, "I never ask God for anything. I only ask that God's will be done. We don't have a right to ask anything beyond that, anything specific."

The result is we keep our prayers chastened and careful; we keep our faith to ourselves safely tucked away in the confines of our church. And it's not long before this little ember of hope or faith or trust, call it what you will, dies away. It happens to many of the characters in John Updike's novels and it's happening today in many churches as well.

Certainly, when we face the great challenges of life, our careful prayers and cautious believing have little to offer. And if someone asks us we might say on a good day we're believers, on a bad day we're agnostics and hedge our bets praying once in a while and going to church on occasion.

You see that's the kind of spiritual economy Jesus came to turn upside down. He came to reverse the tables and tell us that our faith, our love for God, our believing is not our achievement but God's gift.

I love the saying in AA that says the imagination and power and creativity of God are not limited by my imagination and power and creativity.

If we try looking at the world through those eyes we're likely to see something different. We saw *Lord of the Rings* over the holidays. Things were looking pretty bad for the little hobbits. The power and reign of the evil forces seemed invincible. But the little people didn't see it that way—entirely. They didn't let their limited vision defeat them. They continued the difficult journey. And pretty soon, you know what, the Mountain of Fire in Mordor imploded and collapsed.

Wishful thinking? Perhaps. A fairy tale? For sure. Faithful trust? Now you're talking. The problem with the old 'eye for an eye' 'fee for service' system of conducting our lives is the point of reference—the individual.

But the new spirituality in today's story locates the action with God. Jesus, not the steward or bridegroom or Jesus' mother is the actor. The others stand by, with their limited supply of wine, worrying about what will happen when they run out.

The key is they turn to Jesus. Behold he transforms six thirty-gallon jars of water into the best wine they ever tasted. You want wine? Here's wine! That bridegroom could never even have imagined such a thing.

The point is God's abundance obliterates our old boundaries for what is expected and proper and comfortable. Human abundance is very different. Human abundance next to God's abundance is scrawny and miniscule.

We hear it all the time. "The best we can hope for," the doctor says to the patient. "The most she'll ever be able to achieve," the teacher says to the parents. "Costs are rising and giving has peaked," the minister says to the congregation.

But Jesus enters the scene and says to that patient and student and congregation, “You want healing, you want hope, you want ministry? Say the word. Ask and receive. Knock and the door will open.”

Am I going too fast? Am I ignoring the realities and limitations and facts that cry out and say, “You can’t ignore us. It doesn’t add up. The world doesn’t work that way.”

And all those realities and facts are right—in the old order of things. Which is exactly the tension this story creates in our lives. Are we living in the new order or the old order?

I see lots of people and churches and communities living in the old order. Circumscribed and circumspect. It is all a very predictable downward spiral of life.

I remember a brief moment when we were putting our 2000 vision statement together and the question was raised about how our vision squared with our expectations of the stock market and the anticipated performance of our invested funds.

There’s a fair amount of complaining today, and rightly so, that the nation’s economic boom has passed by Western New York. But the minute we start blaming the economy for our ability to envision and carry out ministry is the precise instant we have limited our future to what we alone can achieve.

It’s Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend. If his ministry had been limited to the plight and paltry resources of African Americans in the 50s and 60s he would have achieved nothing. Don’t forget Mother Teresa rising out of the squalor of Calcutta or Lincoln’s humble beginnings or Chris Gardner’s story in *The Pursuit of Happyness* and how his life turned around at a church service. None of them stopped dreaming or hoping or believing when they reached the limits of their own abilities or resources. They each trusted God’s abundance beyond what they could see and touch.

Will I live in the old order of human-dependent possibility or will we live in the new world of God’s promised abundance and new life?

My experience is we don’t just make that choice once in life. We make it again and again and again each day.

Is it, “OK God, I’m running the show with my own map so I can see where I’m going” or “OK God, here I am ready to journey on the way you lead me. I don’t need to see the whole TripTik just point me in the right direction and let me know from time to time I’m on the right path.”

The older I get the more I am convinced of what I learned a long time ago, before adult life and responsibilities tempted me to focus on myself as the primary actor in my life.

I am convinced that if God is ever to become the key player and I am ever to be the vehicle for carrying out his will then I have to let go of this image: “Everything is fine. I’ll handle my own affairs thank you. I’m giving all I can.”

I have to let go and say everything is not fine. I need God, this church needs God, our nation needs God now as much as ever. I have to be honest. I have to admit that next to God’s abundance human abundance is like dead leaves that blow away in the wind. It’s not easy to get people to see things that way. But that is how Jesus hoped they’d start

looking at their lives when they discovered those water jars filled the very thing they needed—in greater abundance than they could ever imagine. Amen.

^[1] William Willimon, Pulpit Resource vol 35, no. 1, p 10.