

Second Sunday after Epiphany 16 January 2022

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

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Epiphany is a season when we celebrate God's glory revealed to us, just as it was shown to the magi who came to worship the Christ child, and to the people who were on the banks of the Jordan River at Jesus' baptism. In our readings today we get images of God's grace and glory through God's expansive love at a wedding; in the joy of marriage; in spiritual gifts for everyone.

The book of Isaiah describes a longing for Israel's glory to be known to all nations, and the new world of the state restored by God is compared to a joyous married couple. Our psalm this morning praises God's steadfast love "for all people" that reaches to the heavens. Saint Paul tells the people of the church in Corinth that all spiritual gifts serve God: even though the gifts may differ, all are offered for the glory of God and the common good. Saint John tells a miracle story about astonishing abundance.

Lutheran theologian Karoline Lewis writes that the word "grace" appears only four times in the Gospel according to Saint John, and all four times are in the prologue, those poetic verses of Chapter One. And that John doesn't call the miracles that Jesus performs "miracles," but

rather “signs.” Signs point us to something beyond themselves; they’re like road signs that alert us to something up ahead. Jesus’ signs are showing us what grace looks like, feels like, smells like, and tastes like.

What grace looks like at the wedding at Cana is abundance. Unbelievable, more-than-you-can imagine abundance.

Let’s revisit the scene. Jesus and his disciples are at a wedding where the hosts run out of wine. We might think that’s inconvenient, maybe embarrassing, right? No. Because in Jesus’ world, running out of wine early wasn’t just a social faux pas, it was a disaster. Wine symbolized the harvest, joy and gladness and hospitality. So running out of wine would be like running out of blessing. At a wedding. It would be tragic.

And that’s when Jesus’ mother prompts him to act. While he was reluctant, she, like mothers of all times and places, urged him forward to do, and become, what he was capable of becoming. Jesus steps in and provides not just more wine, but more wine than the wedding guests could have drunk. Not during the three-day wedding feast, and probably not in three weeks! When Jesus changed the water to wine in those jugs of water for purification, he transformed six jars each holding 20-30 gallons, so that would be like providing almost a

thousand bottles of additional wine. And this was the best wine yet served, not the Gallo jug Chablis or the Franzia box Merlot.

According to Saint John, that's what grace is like: an overflowing of joy, blessing, and the presence of God. Abundant grace that tastes like the best wine when you're expecting the cheap stuff.

Jesus' extravagant miracle is a sign that in him, life, joy, and salvation have arrived.

That's what grace looks like.

In reading the Bible, we can see that first things matter. Saint Mark describes the first thing Jesus does as exorcizing a demon. Saint Luke reports Jesus' first act is preaching a sermon of release and freedom and healing in his hometown, while Saint Matthew first describes the Sermon on the Mount.

In each gospel these things set the tone for that particular gospel. Now, the story of the wedding at Cana only appears in Saint John's gospel. And John describes the first thing Jesus does as providing more wine, joy, and blessings than the wedding couple could ever have imagined or deserved.

That's what grace looks like.

This is a timely message for us, it's so counter-cultural to our society. Much of what we talk about today is scarcity. We don't have enough money, or security, or power. Our politicians talk about all the things that are wrong in order to win our support by promising to make it better. Some marketers focus on creating in us a sense of lack in order to promise their products can fill it.

I was falling into that mindset this weekend; waking up with a little sore throat, I started wondering, shouldn't I be keeping a rapid COVID test at home in the medicine cabinet, just in case? That led to even more anxiety when I realized how difficult it could be to find a pharmacy right now with shelves stocked with at-home tests you could just walk in and choose from.

We are disposed by evolution to pay attention to scarcity and fear. Missing an opportunity might be frustrating, but missing a real threat, including running out of something essential, might be life-threatening. So we're hard-wired to pay attention to scarcity and fear.

We may define the Gospel sometimes in a similar, limited way – that Jesus lived, was crucified, and was raised again by God, in order for God to overlook our misdeeds. The forgiveness of sins is an important, central element of our faith. But at times we may think of it

as the only element of faith, as though Jesus' death and resurrection were a kind of divine eraser for any check marks against us that might be in Saint Peter's ledger.

This morning John reminds us that grace is not only about making up for something we lack, it's also providing way more than what would be enough for us. The wedding guests would have been grateful for a run-of-the-mill bottle. But Jesus went way beyond expectations to provide more and better wine than they ever could have expected.

That's what grace looks like.

Further on in John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly." Abundant life is to know and be known by the One through whom all life comes into being. Abundant life is to be in relationship with the One who loves us so much that he doesn't ever stop giving.

In Jesus Christ we have an abundant, extravagant source of grace to sustain us, grace that is more than sufficient for when we fall short; grace that gives us joy even in the midst of sorrow and struggle. Abundant life means we are joined in Christ to the source of true life, eternal life, that neither suffering nor death can destroy.

The bridegroom has arrived, to whom, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and forever.

A prayer from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whom we commemorate this day:

Yes, Jesus,

I want to be on your right side

or on your left side,

not for any selfish reason.

I want to be on your right side or your best side,

not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition,

but I just want to be there

in love and in justice and in truth

and in commitment to others,

so that we can make of this old world a new world. Amen.

-Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)