

“Signs of Abundance”

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

Susan and I recently celebrated our 32nd wedding anniversary (we are the answer to the question “Who in the world gets married in the winter?!”). As we celebrate this day, we think back not only to our wedding at the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in Philadelphia on January 7, 1984, but to all of the months of preparation that led up to that date. There were decisions about the date and location of the marriage service, who we would invite, the order of the service, and of course the reception. Since we were both persons of humble means (I was a newly-ordained pastor, and my bride a classical musician), we decided to have a simple reception in the parish hall that was catered by a newly-established local company. While we decided to keep the menu simple, we were still concerned that there would be adequate food and drink for all of our guests; one of the greatest *faux pas* that any host can commit is running out of provisions before the event has come to an end. We usually err on the side of caution and order too much, because no one wants to be in that awkward position of telling their guests that there nothing left for them to enjoy.

While the Fourth Gospel offers us few details about the wedding at Cana in today’s Gospel lesson, we do know that the hosts found themselves in such an embarrassing situation. John is the only one of the four Gospels that includes this story in which *“there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.”* (2:1-2). We are not given the names of the bride and groom, nor are we informed about the relationship they had with Jesus and his mother (who is never identified as “Mary” in the Fourth Gospel). What we do know is that *“the wine gave out,”* which would have been a great embarrassment to the hosts. When she is made aware of this, Jesus’ mother turns to him and states that *“they have no wine,”* asking nothing of her son to rectify the situation. But Jesus’ response to his mother makes clear that her words carried an implied request, assuming her son would somehow attend to the problem.

Jesus’ response to his mother at first sounds harsh: *“Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.”* (2:4). Referring to his mother as “woman” is not necessarily a sign of disrespect, but it is an indication that not even his mother has a privileged claim on him. In an episode in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus responds to the crowd’s announcement that *“your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you”* by declaring that *“whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”* (Mark 3:32-33). Likewise, *“what concern is that to you and me”* is a formula of disengagement, not rudeness, similar to Elisha’s declaration to the king of Israel: *“What have I to do with you?”* (2 Kings 3:13).

The reason why Jesus adopts this posture of disengagement toward his mother is explained by his announcement that *“my hour has not yet come.”* “Hour” (*hora*) is used throughout John to refer to the time of eschatological fulfillment, when God’s promises are accomplished:

- “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.’ – 4:21.
- “Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear it will live.” – 5:25.
- “Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out ...” – 5:28.

This “hour” of fulfillment will reach its fulfillment in Jesus’ glorification – his death, resurrection, and ascension (*“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”* – 12:23). Jesus’ actions will be governed by the hour set by God, not by anyone else’s time or will – not even his mother. Any act of self-revelation by Jesus during his ministry is of a piece with Jesus’ self-revelation of his “hour.”

Rather than taking offense at her son’s response, Jesus’ mother turns to the servants and instructs them to *“do whatever he tells you,”* echoing the confidence that the Pharaoh placed in Joseph when he told the Egyptians to *“go to Joseph; what he says to you, do.”* (Genesis 41:55). The mother of Jesus *“continues to trust Jesus’ ability to act, but will not curtail his freedom.”* (Gail O’Day).

Among the items that were present at this wedding banquet were *“six stone jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.”* (2:6). Stone jars, in contrast to earthen jars, were preferable because they are free from the possibility of Levitical impurity (*“And if any of them falls into any earthen vessel, all that is in it shall be unclean, and you shall break the vessel.”* – Leviticus 11:33). The “rites of purification” for which they were used probably refer to the ritual cleansing of hands at meals, which would later become a topic of controversy when *“a discussion about purification arose between John’s disciples and a Jew.”* (3:25). The extravagant size of the stone jars anticipates the extravagance of the miracle that begins when Jesus instructs the servants to *“fill the jars with water,”* when they then filled to the brim. Without reporting on the precise moment of the miracle, Jesus’ next words of instruction are for the servants to *“draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.”* While the steward did not know the source of this water that had been transformed into wine, *“the servants who had drawn the water knew,”* and function as witnesses to the transformation. Knowledge of the source of where Jesus’ gifts come from is pivotal in the Fourth Gospel (*“The woman said to him ‘Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?’”* – 4:11). Knowledge of the source of Jesus’ gifts is a step toward knowledge of where Jesus himself comes from. After tasting this wine of unknown origin, the steward calls the bridegroom and compliments him because *“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.”* (2:10). In the Old Testament, an abundance of good wine is an eschatological symbol, a sign of the joyous arrival of God’s new age (*“The time is surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.”* – Amos 9:13). This suggests that the story of the wedding at Cana can be read as more than the first act in Jesus’ ministry. It also stands as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes, the inaugural act of God’s promised salvation, the day when *“the nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give.”* (Isaiah 62:2).

The miracle at Cana is interpreted in the final verse as a manifestation of Jesus’ glory: *“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”* (2:11). The first “sign” at Cana is a portent of things to come, a visible indicator of Jesus’ authority because through it his glory is revealed. Throughout the Fourth Gospel, the word “sign” (*semeion*) is used to refer to Jesus’ miracles, because the significance of the miracle does not rest solely on the act itself but in that to which the miracle points. While there is not story of the Transfiguration in John’s Gospel (Luke’s account reports that *“while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white ... Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’”* – Luke 9:29, 35), God’s glory is continually manifested in Jesus’ life and ministry:

- *“And 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.”* – 1:14
- *“This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God’s glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.”* – 11:4

- “Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.” – 17:24.

The ultimate moment of glorification occurs at Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, when God will *“glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.”* (17:5).

Within the traditional form of a miracle story, the miracle at Cana points to themes of theological significance for the whole Gospel in which *“Jesus inaugurates his ministry with a vivid enactment of the gift he has to offer.”* (O’Day). The abundance of this miracle is a sign pointing to Jesus’ declaration that as the Good Shepherd *“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”* (10:10). These signs of abundance are seen throughout the Fourth Gospel as they point to the abundant blessings that God bestows upon all God’s people through Jesus Christ:

- It is an abundance seen in the bread that feeds the multitudes who *“kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick”* (6:2). The abundance at the Feeding of the Five Thousand (the only miracle story recorded in all four Gospels) points to Jesus who declares that *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* (6:35).
- In his encounter with the Samaritan woman who has gone to the well to draw water, Jesus declares that *“everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.”* (4:13-14). It is the promise that Jesus will later offer to *“anyone who is thirsty [to] come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”* (7:37-38).
- All of this abundance points to the most abundant gift of all: the gift of everlasting life, the promise that *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.”* (3:16); for *“this is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.”* (6:40).

When we invite guests to a feast – be it a wedding reception, or Thanksgiving dinner, or the celebration of a birthday or anniversary – we strive to ensure that there will be adequate food and drink for all of our guests. The same is true for when we prepare to celebrate the Lord’s Supper; since we don’t ask people to RSVP to our Lord’s invitation to partake of his holy supper, we strive to make certain that we have bread and wine sufficient for everyone who comes to receive “the gifts of God for the people of God.” But the abundance that we prepare for our celebration of Holy Communion is a sign that points to the true abundance that we receive when we partake of the body and blood of Christ that has been given and shed for us for the forgiveness of sins:

- “The words ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sin’ show us that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” – *Small Catechism*.
- “To eat this meal in the community is to continue what began in the life of Jesus, who came eating and drinking, held meals with sinners, spoke of the dominion of God as a wedding feast, and interpreted his own death as a meal. For the community the meal is the very presence of Jesus himself.” – Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*

The abundance of wine that Jesus provided at the wedding at Cana gave the host the means to continue to celebration of that festive occasion; but it also points beyond itself to serve as a sign of the abundance that Jesus provides all of us – not only an abundance of all that we need for daily living, but the abundance of his gracious love which has been poured out upon us fully and completely. It is the abundance that is seen most clearly in his offering of himself in his death and resurrection, so that all that would prevent us from receiving

this abundant grace no longer has power over us, so that we may live in trust and hope that the promise spoken through the prophet Isaiah will be fulfilled for us in the hour in which all will be accomplished:

- “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from the earth, for the LORD has spoken.” – Isaiah 25:6-8.

Jesus would leave the wedding feast at Cana to continue his journey to Capernaum with his mother, his brother, and his disciples. The feast would come to an end, and while we do not know for certain we can assume that the wine that Jesus provided was sufficient for all to enjoy. But while the marriage feast ended, the message of what transpired at Cana lives on: in Jesus Christ we have the signs of God’s abundant love that is present among us in our Lord who provides for us in abundance so that all may share in the blessings that are ours in our Saviour whose *“steadfast love never ceases, whose mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”* (Lamentations 3:22-23). Amen.