

## ***“The good wine.”***

January 16, 2022 – John 2:1-11 (Psalm 36)

John’s gospel is always going to be a little different sounding after a steady diet of Christmas texts. John’s approach is mystical, and marvelous, and presents Jesus as a fully formed adult human with roots and connections stretching back to the beginning of time.

So, in John’s gospel after that mystic hymn to ‘the Word’ and a quick tour to gather up disciples (all in the first chapter) Jesus gets right to work...sort of.

We’re fond of telling stories about this gospel passage – imagining further conversations – questioning Jesus’ attitude toward his mother (not to mention his mother’s approach to the situation.) We enjoy the astonishment of the steward and might harbor some curiosity about the groom’s lack of preparedness where his wedding plans are concerned. And for all our imagined familiarity with this particular story, we really don’t appreciate the lesson it offers.

This is not really a story about the ‘miracle’ of water turned to wine. It’s not about Jesus’ reluctance or his mother’s insistence. It’s a story about how the disciple’s belief is first inspired. The author of John’s gospel has no time to waste; in fact, the author has a very specific point to prove, since at the time of its writing, eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus life were in pretty short supply. The author wants us to know that these Jesus’ stories will endure, and he wants to be sure we know why. We are being invited to believe in this marvellous, mystical expression of divinity called Jesus. And so, we begin with the story of an abundance of ‘good’ wine.

Weddings are meant to be festivals of plenty. Plenty of emotion, plenty of family and friends, plenty of food and drink and music and dancing. We usually leave these celebrations buzzing with contentment, and often talk for weeks about the joy – the shared experiences – and not infrequently, the abundance of the event. John’s gospel puts Jesus in a place where all of us can relate – so, let’s relate.

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Let's forget about the mechanics of miracles – the how of turning water to wine. Let's forget about our hesitancy around 'acts of God,' and our incessant hunger for information. Let's just imagine a moment of such unexpected and overwhelming generosity that we would be talking about it for days. A good party turned suddenly into an “EPIC event.” When that happens, who gets the credit? The hosts, of course.

Jesus hesitates – ‘it's not my time,’ he says – maybe because he knows the credit might get redirected. Nonetheless, the party is elevated and praise goes round the dance floor.

But back in the kitchen, where the noise from the band is just noise, the disciples BELIEVE.

Belief is difficult to define. We each account for our experiences differently, and often come to different conclusions when faced with the same evidence. Belief carries a sense of hope – optimism that defies reality. Faith is a required element; you have to trust that the impossible is often possible.

Belief is not needed if your celebration hasn't been interrupted by the possibility of failure and the wine keeps flowing, but in that busy kitchen – among the waiters and the other kitchen help who knew there was a crisis looming – there was an understanding that this sudden abundance was, indeed, a miracle.

Those in Jesus' presence – the ones who BELIEVE- also understand something else. The gift of abundance is available to everyone, no matter their expectations, their level of knowledge, or their particular beliefs.

You see, the thing about divine abundance - about the gifts of God - the thing about faith that the Christian church doesn't often acknowledge is that you didn't have to **believe** to **receive**.

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Our belief doesn't control God's gifts – our belief gives us a platform for grateful, gracious living, and that helps us make the best use of God's gifts.

The guests know nothing of the miracle; they only know that the wine doesn't stop – in fact, the wine gets better and better. We have been fooled (by some popular fantasies about faith) into thinking that belief is needed to unlock Divine abundance. This heresy is known as 'the prosperity gospel,' and it has a much wider reach than we might think; the notion that success is a sign of divine blessing; the suggestion that God might smile on our endeavours and grant us some 'extra' benefit. We pray for 'success'; we honour material gain – in fact it can be argued that the church embodies material gain (to an extent) with our soaring church buildings located on prime urban real estate. But God's abundance doesn't not recognize our boundaries. God's favour is generous and extravagant in ways we can't imagine. God is not impressed by the things that so easily impress us. God simply IS abundant, generous and hospitable. To everyone

This sign in John's gospel ought to put all that prosperity gospel nonsense to rest, since those who benefit most from this unexpected abundance haven't got a clue. The party goes on – the celebration continues unabated – the water is wine, and there seems to be no end to it.

Now – full disclosure; this week has not been a great week for me in terms of my understanding of God's magnificent abundance. Oh, there's been abundance, alright, but an abundance of sadness, worry and grief. It's been the glass half-empty experience for me. And when I work my way through one of these periods, it can be difficult to see the obvious. I study Scripture for a living – I'm always considering the way that these ancient stories might bring hope and purpose to modern life, not just for my congregation but for me too – and it doesn't always come easily. If ever there was a week I needed a sign from God, it was this week.

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I don't know what your sign might be – mine was a chance to re-consider the miracle of the abundant, good wine. This sign might not cause you to believe – ok, I get it; this miracle stuff is hard on the post-modern head. But the lesson I cling to from the second chapter of John this morning is that the abundance of God (the stuff that really matters) doesn't depend on belief. The goodness of God just is – like it or not; believe it or not. Divine abundance is here, among us.

We can enjoy this divine plenty without acknowledging the source. We are free to imagine that it's just 'our lucky day,' and enjoy the party. But as people determined to follow Jesus, maybe we can admit that we are constantly surprised by the things that really matter – the abundance of love and grace and mercy and hope that we discover in the midst of everything.