

John 2:1-11 **Signs of Abundance**
Sermon Preached at IPLC 1/20/2019, by Joanne Otte

In The Gospel according to John, we hear the story of the wedding at Cana. The scene and atmosphere is celebratory—it's a party. Among Jesus' miracles, I think this is one that many people have heard of or at least have heard references to changing water into wine, even in pop culture. Not only is it an idea or concept familiar to many, it also was Jesus' very first miracle. Interesting to note that his first miracle was not to heal someone or cast out evil spirits, but to keep a party lively and on-going and also to extend hospitality to a community of people. It is a story of abundance: more wine for everyone! This story is only mentioned in John, as is the site of the wedding: Cana. The exact location of present day Cana is under debate, but scholars seem to agree it was North of Nazareth (Jesus' hometown) in Galilee. ¹Cana was the home of Nathanael², one of Jesus' disciples, and in the region of Galilee, which was known to be home to roustabouts and outsiders—a place where you might get robbed, where people were rebelling against the status quo and where Gentiles lived. Roy Harrisville, a theologian and pastor notes that “From the very beginning therefore, Jesus is portrayed as a trans-national figure in the Gospel. His life and work go beyond the boundaries of race and nation.” ³With that said, considering it wasn't too far away from Nazareth and that Nathanael was from there—it's not too surprising to hear that Jesus, his mother, Mary, and the disciples were all invited to the wedding.

The way in which this miracle comes about is subtle. Mary says to Jesus, “They have no wine.” We see in this a gentle, motherly nudge to her son. She doesn't directly tell him to do something or even ask, but just points out the reality. But, in this simple statement, directed at him, it is clear that Mary knows. She knows her son. Knows that he has the POWER to do something about this. Knows this is an OPPORTUNITY, a prime moment to show his power, show his glory. ⁴Jesus' response sounds strange to 21st century hearers, “Woman, what concern is that you to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” It sounds like a rebuke or retort, but the footnotes in my NRSV Bible from Wayne Meeks and others assure me that while his response is a negative one, it shouldn't be seen as disrespectful or even uncommon to refer to her as “Woman.” ⁵Aside from this tone, it does belay an understanding between them. “My hour has not yet come” is a clear reference to his death, but also to all that is to come—Jesus' public ministry, the healing, the signs, the miracles, the struggle. In some ways it seems as if Mary and Jesus are having their own little secret conversation that only they understand. There is so much in that little phrase, “My hour has not yet come.” It's one part a call out to the scene of his death and all that surrounds that. So heavy. Prophetic. In another way, it's a conversation among family. Two people who know each so deeply that they intuitively speak in ways others don't catch. I'm sure all of us have experienced those moments when our mother, or sister or brother says something to you that *clearly* has multiple layers of meaning, but also goes over the heads of anyone else listening. This seems like one of those moments to me. I love Mary's response. In spite of Jesus' negative reaction, she's confident. She tells the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Again, she knows. Knows of his power, knows of his abilities, knows whatever he does, it will change things. And, he does—he turns water, large quantities of it, into ridiculous amounts of wine. The flip side of Mary's knowing and urging onward is the reality that many, possibly even MOST of the people at this wedding have no clue that a miracle has occurred. It's Jesus' very first miracle and there is really no fanfare, no public viewing. It could have been quite shameful for the bridegroom if wine had run out completely. Wedding parties were known to last many

¹ Jesus and His World: An Archaeological and Cultural Dictionary by John J. Rousseau and Rami Arav

² The Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV, Edited by Wayne A. Meeks et al

³ Working Preacher Commentary on John 2:1-11 (January 17, 2010) by Rev. Roy Harrisville

⁴ Working Preacher Commentary on John 2:1-11 (January 20, 2013) by Karoline Lewis

⁵ The Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV, Edited by Wayne A. Meeks et al

days and guests did often contribute to the festivities, but still we know it's a problem and could have been an embarrassment. ⁶What could have been a difficult and shameful moment for the bridegroom turns into one where he is lauded for saving the best wine for last. Not only is the bridegroom's reputation lifted, but everyone benefits, even though only a select few are aware of this miracle of abundance and hospitality.

How often in life are we unaware of miracles occurring right under our noses? How often do we fail to see leadership going on behind the scenes that enables the person in the spotlight to shine? How often are we blind to the abundance and goodness in our lives? How often do we find ourselves, like Jesus, at a moment of opportunity, a leadership moment, a turning point and we initially don't want to take it, don't think it's the right time. It happens all the time, right? Frequently. I see myself in all of these people and circumstances.

I've been thinking about my Great Aunt Alice a lot recently. Her 95th birthday was January 18th and I had the pleasure of visiting her right after Christmas this year. Let me tell you a bit about my Great Aunt Alice. She's the one in the family that knows everyone, despite having over 20 nieces and nephews and a multitude more of great nieces and nephews and so forth. I'm one of those great nieces, but consistently every year I got a postcard from her on my birthday signed, "Con Tanto Amore, Aunt Alice." We often also received small, but unusual or unique gifts from her. On more than one occasion I got a "birthday book" where you write down (so you won't forget to celebrate!) the birthdays of your friends and family. Aunt Alice lived a cosmopolitan life—out in Seattle—very different from my life growing up in small town Southern IL. Her postcards often were of great works of art or came from museums or travel she had been doing. We didn't see her often, but when we did she would regale us with stories and would always encourage everyone to sing a round of, "My Lover Was a Logger." Aunt Alice is one of those people that endears you (and everyone else) to her through her silliness, her affection, her individuality, and her hospitality. I think for some people, like my Aunt Alice, seeing the abundance around you and sharing it with others is just part of their personality. If you visited her home, she didn't want you to leave empty-handed. Just recently when I visited her, along with my parents and my daughter, Alma, in her senior home she was *still* trying to give us things despite living in a small space. "I want you to take that Poinsettia home with you when you leave. I don't know where it came from—it just appeared here and I'm sure you'd enjoy it." "And, I have this 5 lb. bag of chocolate almond bark. Do you like chocolate? You should take that with you when you leave!" Despite our protests, "But Aunt Alice, what if you have other visitors—maybe you'll want to share chocolate with them too?" Her response was immediate and confident: "Well, then that'll just be too bad for them. I want to give it to you." She wasn't concerned with saving some for the future. She didn't care that we didn't need a 5 lb. bag of chocolate. She wanted to share. At some point during our visit I asked if she missed Seattle (about 5 years ago she moved to this senior home in Chattanooga, TN to be closer to family) and her answer was again one of gratefulness and abundance. She said, "I don't think about what I miss. I have a good life here. I have my health—I don't wear hearing aids, I can get around to where I need to, I have friends here and activities I'm involved in." All of that is true...and she also has lost much of her sight and her memory is failing. I no longer get those birthday postcards and when I was there she knew my mother and father but asked, "And who are you two again?," referring to me and Alma, my daughter. I didn't skip a beat and reminded her who we were. It was painful to know I was part of her memory that was fading—someone who had known and remembered me for so long, who had welcomed me at her home and made a toast at my wedding. But, it's not just me. I'm sure it's me and SO many other great nieces, great great nieces and nephews. You know what though? She's still that same woman of abundance...she still told stories, urged me on--wanting to know what other questions I had about the family, we still sang, "My Lover Was a Logger" and she told us to make sure we visited again sometime soon. Alice Mariani is not blind to the gifts around and within her, she still celebrates family and has a posture of gratefulness.

⁶ Working Preacher Sermon Brainwave (January 12, 2009) Podcast with Rolf Jacobsen, Karoline Lewis and Matt Skinner,

She seems to be a great example of someone who hasn't missed the miracles. Who has a gift for hospitality and celebration. Is that what we should learn and take from this story of Jesus turning water into wine? Like the comment Jesus made to his mother, "My hour has not yet come" I think there is more. There are layers. Yes, we should have our eyes wide open for abundance, of recognizing the good in our lives, and have a posture of gratefulness and sharing. This turning water into wine is not just an act of keeping a party going, of making people happy. In John's Gospel he calls miracles "signs."⁷ This is a clue that they are not simply done for the sake of the one on receiving end. They are meant to alert us to something more. This sign was the beginning of Jesus's ministry. It was the epiphany into who Jesus was and what he was about. It was a testament to his power. In John it says, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." What an interesting beginning. I do wonder what went on in Jesus' mind in between him basically saying, "Nah, I'm not going to do anything about this wine problem. Not my time" to then turning water into wine. We know Mary lifted up his leadership—told the servants to listen and do what he said. Was it that nudge from his mother, that confidence in him that pushed him into more public ministry in that moment? Or, was this the way it was supposed to happen and Jesus, the divine, who was one with God, knew from the beginning that his first miracle could play out this way—with few seeing, but with his mother and the disciples nearby. I kind of like to think both are possible.

That moment of public leadership and public ministry is huge. As I said, it tells us who Jesus was and what he was about. For most of us, we need our mother or wife or husband or all of the above urging us forward to be able to take risks and big steps. We need people confidently reminding us who we are and who we're meant to be and become. People who see the greatness in us.

On Monday, our nation celebrates the birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We celebrate and recognize what a great man he was. What an extraordinary person and leader he was. Martin Luther King Jr. was someone who faced immense opposition and in the face of it continued with what he knew was right. Yes: A national holiday where we celebrate and honor a Christian pastor. He was a civil rights leader, an activist, but also a Christian, grounded in his faith, assured in his hope and walking in the path of Jesus. We know that God was the source of his conviction and his strength. He would not be deterred, he was a visionary and visionaries help others see what seems impossible. A few of his more famous quotes attest to this. He said, "If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl, but whatever you do keep moving forward." And "We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope." This was man who went to jail 29 times, regularly had his life threatened and ultimately was murdered. Yet, we know, he points to God, his infinite hope. In his last speech he says, "He allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over and I've seen the promised land." This was a man, despite trials and tribulations, who lived in hope, who persevered, who trusted in Jesus and had abiding faith in the promises of God.

Jesus' first sign of turning water into wine points to God's promises as well. It is through this that his disciples are able to see him even more clearly and believe in him. This sign reveals his glory and greatness. It tells us not only who Jesus is, but helps us understand the character of God and how the two are one and the same. Jesus' mother, Mary, and his disciples believed he was the Messiah and had an idea of what that meant to be the Son of God, but with each of these signs and continued relationship with Jesus epiphanies abound. God chooses to reveal himself and perform miracles in Cana—a trans-national place that crosses boundaries of race and nation. Jesus is a leader who through his miraculous actions, lifts up others to be highlighted and celebrated. Through this sign of turning water into wine we see that life with Jesus points to how close God is to us. God in Jesus celebrates with us, delights in eating and drinking, revels in community. Let us rejoice in the feast, knowing that Jesus' time has come. At the hour of our own death (which includes our everyday failings of memory, our lack of leadership, our blindness to the miracles in our midst or our own actual death) Jesus always remembers us, welcomes us and invites us to the abundance of the Promiseland.

⁷ The Writings of The New Testament by Luke Timothy Johnson