

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 19, 2025 (2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Year C)
John 2:1-11

A priest gets pulled over for speeding.

The police officer sees an empty wine bottle in his car and smells alcohol on his breath.

"Father, have you been drinking?" asks the officer.

"Only water, my son." replies the priest.

"Why do I smell wine then?" questions the officer.

The priest, looking at the wine bottle, replies, "Oh MY LORD, He's done it again!"

This story, the first of the SIGNS of Jesus, the wedding at Cana, is SINGLED out by humorists quite a bit. There aren't many stories from the Gospels DIRECTLY REFERENCED MORE than THIS one. These are some of my favorite memes about it.

(*Show picture.*) Notice the sign. But that's not water. The meme says, "Jesus was here."

(*Show picture.*) It says, "And now we wait."

A quick story: A small boy was asked on a television variety show if he attended Sunday school. When he said he did, he was asked, "What are you learning?"

After thinking for a moment, the boy said, "If you're having a wedding (and you want to have a good time), make sure JESUS is there!"

What strikes me about all the jokes about Jesus and the wine is that the little BOY was the closest to the TRUTH. "If...you want to have a good time, make sure JESUS is there!"

FIRST events in stories are usually pretty important. They set the tone. They help the reader anticipate what's COMING. They shape expectations. FIRST events MATTER.

So, it's notable that EACH of the four gospels marks the beginning of Jesus' MINISTRY with a DIFFERENT event. In Mark, the first thing Jesus does is cast out an unclean spirit, announcing his intention to stand AGAINST all that would KEEP the children of God from abundant life. In Matthew, the first major event of Jesus' ministry is his sermon on the mount, where he TEACHES the crowds from the mountain like Moses. In Luke, Jesus PREACHES first, announcing his intention to heal and feed and release the captives and bring good news to the poor. And each of these things MATTERS, as they set the tone and even the theological agenda for those particular gospels.

Which is why it's SIGNIFICANT that, in JOHN'S Gospel, the first thing that Jesus does is just go to a WEDDING. How DIFFERENT from the other three. No healing, no preaching, no teaching; just a WEDDING. Why? Because what HAPPENS at that wedding MATTERS.

The hosts run out of wine. INCONVENIENT, WE'D say, EMBARRASSING. Even today, imagine if you were at a wedding reception and they ran out of FOOD. It would be a DISGRACE for the family. But is it REALLY such a big deal that Mary should think that JESUS should get involved?

Well, YES. To run out of wine at a FIRST century wedding wasn't just a social *faux pas*, it was a DISASTER. Wine was associated with blessing, joy, and goodness. It was a SIGN of God's abundance, of gladness and hospitality. To run OUT of wine would have felt like a CURSE, like you'd run out of BLESSING. And THAT was a TRAGEDY.

Which is why Jesus steps in and saves the day. He provides not just MORE wine, but more wine than the crowd COULD have drunk, not only in the remaining three DAYS of the wedding feast, but probably the next three WEEKS. You see, in changing those six HUGE basins of water into wine, Jesus provided about 180 GALLONS of wine, close to nearly a THOUSAND BOTTLES of wine. It's more wine, joy, and BLESSING than THIS couple – or ANY couple – could POSSIBLY have IMAGINED or deserved.

And not only that, but as the surprised steward discovered, it's not just cheap BOX wine, but the BEST wine they'd had yet. I'll add, since JESUS CREATED it, it was probably the best wine ANYONE has EVER had.

The key to this story is a few lines BEFORE it. John writes, "From his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace" (1:16). Not just GRACE, mind you, but grace UPON grace. An ABUNDANCE of grace. And that's what we have HERE. Jesus CREATES ABUNDANCE. Wine UPON wine, blessing UPON blessing, JOY UPON JOY, and GRACE UPON GRACE.

This is what grace LOOKS like. That's why John makes this the FIRST event in Jesus ministry. Grace is not ONLY the free gift of God's love; it ALSO means ABUNDANCE. As in UNBELIEVABLE, more-than-you-could-EVER-DESERVE, more-than-you-can-POSSIBLY-IMAGINE, abundance. And THAT, according to John, is what grace is LIKE: an OVERFLOWING of joy, blessing, and the presence of God.

I mean, Jesus COULD have provided just ENOUGH wine for the party to go on, and, given that people had already been drinking a few DAYS, even a few ORDINARY bottles would have been GRATEFULLY RECEIVED. That would have been ENOUGH. But when they LEAST expected it, Jesus went WAY, WAY BEYOND EXPECTATIONS to provide MORE and BETTER wine than they EVER could have HOPED for.

Why? Because that's what GRACE LOOKS like. It overflows.

This is how God WORKS. God KNOWS we could ALL USE a little MORE GRACE, and the LORD PROVIDES, MORE than ENOUGH.

I want to share something with you. Before I came to Aitkin, my LAST parish was a STRONG congregation. It was thriving. We had a good thing going there. It was ENOUGH. Wendy and I thought I might even RETIRE at that church.

But God began to give me dreams. Not just feelings or inklings; I mean LITERAL DREAMS. I dreamt of a church that was doing EVERYTHING we were ALREADY doing THERE, children's ministry and both traditional and contemporary worship, but ALSO MORE. I dreamt of a church that was involved in the community, that was feeding people and providing meals for people, that was SERVING. I thought that God wanted me to begin those things THERE, where I WAS, but THAT church wasn't CALLED to that.

When I interviewed here at First Lutheran, God said to me, "HERE! THIS is what it LOOKS like. HERE is where I want you to be."

I was ALREADY in a HEALTHY, GRACE-FILLED congregation, but God showed me MORE – GRACE UPON GRACE, ABUNDANT grace, OVERFLOWING grace. YOU showed me that.

There's a saying that goes "Misery might love company, but so does joy. And joy throws much better parties" (Bill Ivey).

This is why this story of God's abundance in Jesus is so important. Misery loves company, and the world is FULL of it, trying to drag us down. JOY is a CELEBRATION, and JESUS is right in the MIDDLE of it. HERE, in the CHURCH, and ESPECIALLY in THIS place, we have an ABUNDANCE of relationships, of conversations, of SMILES – of JOY.

And that abundance is meant to spill over. There are MORE than enough smiles and waves and CONVERSATIONS here, enough to carry ON into the WEEK, to OTHER places. To bring OUR ABUNDANCE of joy to OTHERS.

These small acts of kindness, of connection, remind us that not ONLY is grace a free gift of God's generosity; it's also the ABUNDANCE of joy and blessing and LIFE that are OURS in Christ.

You know how they say you should bring a bottle of WINE ALONG when you go to a friend's house? GRACE AND JOY are the wine that JESUS brings to the party.

EVERYONE could USE a little MORE GRACE, and HE is where to FIND it. So yes, if we want to have a good time, we should INVITE JESUS, but the party doesn't END HERE. The JOY and the GRACE are OVERFLOWING. There's MORE than ENOUGH of HIS wine.

ENOUGH to take some ALONG to give to a FRIEND. Amen.