

“A Sign of Grace in Abundance” 2016

Psalm 36:5-10 John 2:1-11

Why, do you think **God the Father sent his Son, Jesus Christ into this world?**

According to Scripture, Jesus came to save us and to reveal the truth about God... as it's clearly laid out in John 3:16-17

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

But what does that suggest about the true nature of God, and what do you suppose the Lord our God is really like?

Do you believe that God is aware, interested, knows your name and concerns, and actually cares about the little details of your life?

Do you think that God might be disappointed or angry with you, or upset that you've failed or aren't trying hard enough?

The Good News is that the John 2 passage suggests otherwise ... **that our God loves imperfect people and sinful people, and that in Jesus Christ, grace and mercy abound... even when we haven't asked for it or deserve it.**

In the Gospel of John, the first miracle that the author mentions is a wonderful story about grace and what God is really like. It begins with Jesus, his mother and disciples at a wedding in the rural, peasant village of Cana.

In those days, a wedding was a week-long celebration, a very public affair that involved the whole village in time of joyful feasting, festivity and frivolity. The celebration was all about merging the two family-clans by building trust, new loyalties and new relationships.

But according to vs. 3, there was a crisis.

When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

In that culture, to run out of wine on such an important occasion, would be a social disaster of epic and lasting proportions, and would be understood as an extreme and public insult to the bride's family, their friends and community.

Running out of wine meant that the groom's family hadn't bothered prepare to provide adequate hospitality, or didn't care enough to honor the bride's family ...or worse, that the groom's family not only lacked resources, but were not respected and honored enough in the community that they could call on friends and neighbors to help them out with such an important social event.

And though running out of wine was truly a dishonoring disaster, it seems that they were not socially close enough to Jesus that he felt any responsibility to help bail them out.vs. 4-5

And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

That response probably sounds a bit cold and harsh to our ears, but it's an Aramaic idiom that doesn't translate well or easily into English... that is really saying, why is this a concern to you or to me, and this

is not the right time or place for my ministry and power to be publically revealed... though clearly Jesus did respond and resolves the problem, but not in a way that attracted or drew attention to himself.
vs. 6-7, 9

Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ... When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew).

Beyond just telling this story about a miraculous event, it is included in John as a prophetic or symbolic sign that will point to why Jesus came and helps explain the purpose, mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. The stone water jars were used for ritual purity laws of Judaism, that primarily focused on of trying to please through law and ritual purity a demanding and angry God, rather than a loving Father who seeks the lost and outcasts as Jesus described by his parables and his life-example.

If you think about it, the conflict that developed between Jesus and the religious authorities was centered around religious laws and traditions of ritual purity... **which were replaced by the fine wine of God's gracious love. *This story is a foretaste of the Gospel Jesus came to accomplish.**

The stone jars of Jewish law, tradition and purity rituals, those legalistic ways of trying to placate a disappointed God, **were replaced by God reaching down to unworthy sinners with the sacrificial, gracious love of Jesus Christ.**

The abundance of fine wine given into a hopeless situation, is being used as a symbol and metaphor for **the limitless abundance** of God's gracious love for lost, broken sinners.

***Jesus took 180 gallons of legalism, ritual purification & guilt, and transformed them into 180 gallons of grace and mercy.**

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew prophets, Amos, Joel and Isaiah in particular, write about an abundance of wonderful wine as a sign they associated with the coming of the Messiah.

This story is all grace and Gospel, with no restraints or limits. It intends to demonstrate unexpected abundance in the midst of perceived scarcity, **the whole village caught up in the joy and celebration, yet not even aware of the amazing gift they'd been given.**

Jesus could have simply made more of the same mediocre wine, but instead, he make a vintage so notably wonderful, that it amazes the chief steward of the wedding – vs. 9-10

When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from, the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "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."

Jesus could have made just enough wine to get by and avoid social embarrassment, but those six 30-gallon water jars filled to the brim became 180 gallons of the finest wine...**way more than enough for a peasant village wedding celebration... as a sign of our God's grace, of Jesus who transformed ordinary water into extraordinary wine in abundance.**

It is wonderful that Jesus rescued a family's honor 2000 year ago but the abundant fine wine has a more personal meaning to me. Running out of wine for me, is when my gas gauge is on empty, that familiar weary condition of defeat and disappointment. It describes when I've been wrong, made a mistake or

failed, when I am embarrassed, discouraged, I've hurt someone, and I feel joyless regret, I feel hopeless or guilty... we've all been there, "when the wine has run out".

But into our helpless despair, God's grace, love and compassion arrive like the finest vintage in overflowing abundance, as limitless hope, possibilities, another second chance... more of the amazing gift of grace than I am aware or even notice. This passage is all about the Gospel message of joyful hope that God's grace and mercy come in limitless abundance, and that there is cause for gratitude and celebration, an assurance we can trust, that we're not on our own... **but for some reason, sometimes we seem to hold back, and we don't always trust and recognize good news as good.**

The problem is, that we don't necessarily handle grace very well. God's gracious love is scary, it can seem risky and radical, even among folks who hang out in churches with God. For surely, we assume, God must demand more than that we just let ourselves be loved, and surely must require more than just a walk with the Lord.

A friend wrote about organizing a big denominational gathering, where everyone was given a helium balloon coming into worship and instructed that sometime during the service, when they felt the touch of God's presence, grace & love, they should express their joy and gratitude by letting go, and releasing their balloon to soar up into the air.

It was a neat & creative idea except that when the service ended, almost a third were still holding onto their balloons ...**unwilling or unable to just let them go and soar freely.**

Sometimes we so focus on our troubles, fears, failings & defeats, that **we miss the excessive extravagance of God's grace, that is always way more and far better than anything we might figure out or imagine...** for if Jesus could turn plain ordinary water into fine wine then what else could God's grace, power and love accomplish, and what might God intend to do with us and our lives?

As I returned and thought about that this week, and considered when my wine has run out, and my needle has been on empty, whether by the consequence of my own mistakes & failings or by the crash of difficult circumstance & situation; God has never left me to struggle alone or abandoned in the dust, but always God has fulfilled the promise of **Romans 8:28,**

For we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

That's an always, no exceptions – God has never let me down!

That is also the point of the Psalm 36 passage, vs. 5, 7-8

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

That phrase, "steadfast love" is from the Hebrew word, "hesed" ...an important idea that flows all through the Old Testament. The root of the word, "hesed" is a mother's absolute self-giving love for her little child that in the ideal, never fails, weakens or ever gives up ...**a strong and tender maternal image of grace and promise, of God's unfailing love for all the people he created.**

So I wonder, how often do we not respond to God's grace and love, because we didn't notice because we were not looking... just as I doubt that many in the village of Cana even noticed the miracle of the

wine that day. 180 gallons, 800-1000 bottles of incredibly fine wine, for an insignificant peasant village wedding celebration?

Our God does wonderful and amazing abundance, especially when we are running on empty and especially when we are willing to listen and notice. I believe that right here, right now in this congregation, God has been making an abundance of some mighty fine wine, calling ordinary Christians to extraordinary service.

Honestly, I am overwhelmed by all that God brought about this past year, what amazing and wonderful blessings we have received, mission opportunities that God is entrusting to us...**clearly the hand of God is at work in our midst – grace abounds...** and so I believe and boldly declare, the best is yet to come, for as Jesus explained in John 10:10,

I have come that you may have life, **and have it abundantly.**

So let us this day, celebrate and soar with our God **who is never stingy, not with wine, and definitely not with joy, grace or love!**

As Paul points out in Ephesians 3:20-21,

... to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.