

"Celebration"

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Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, move in our thoughts and feelings, and reveal signs of your extravagant, abundant love for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

When Johnny Carson was the host of *The Tonight Show*, he interviewed an eight year-old boy. The boy was asked to appear on the show because he had rescued two friends in a coal mine outside his hometown in West Virginia.

As Carson questioned the boy, it became apparent to Carson and to the audience that the boy was a Christian. So, Carson asked him if he attended Sunday school. When the boy said he did, Carson asked, "What are you learning in Sunday school?"

"Last week," the boy replied, "our lesson was about when Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine." The audience laughed. Carson kept a straight face and asked, "And what did you learn from that story?"

The boy thought for a bit and said with a smile, "If you're going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!"

As a Christian wedding officiant, I invite Jesus to every wedding!

At the wedding in Cana, which is less than 10 miles north of Jesus' hometown of Nazareth, Jesus gave an extravagant wedding gift to an un-named couple he knew well – he gave them an extravagant abundance of really good wine! Ken read to us from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that God has provided us with an abundance of really good gifts; the abilities of: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophesy, discernment, and spiritual proclamation and interpretation. We've just finished the 12 days of Christmas, and God keeps on giving us more gifts!

The account of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana only appears in the gospel according to John, yet it's one of the most well known and most often quoted of Jesus' miracles. Maybe it's because of the inherent

attractiveness of being able to turn water into wine, but it's right up there with walking on water, multiplying loaves and fish, and miraculously healing people.

Turning water into wine is the first of only seven miracles described in the gospel according to John. It's the inaugural miraculous event of Jesus' ministry. At the conclusion of his description of this first miraculous sign, John explains that "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." Later, near the end of the gospel according to John, John reveals the purpose of the seven miraculous signs, saying: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

The first sign of the Messiah, the Son of God, that leads us to believe and have life in Jesus' name, was at a wedding in Cana. Weddings are times of celebration, times when we rejoice and express joy, times when we enjoy the company of those we love and celebrate the bond of unity and commitment between the bride and groom, and also between every other couple at the celebration.

In Jesus' time, the bride and groom celebrated their wedding, not with a honeymoon away, but with a week-long wedding feast at the groom's home. To run out of wine early, for any reason, was a crisis for the family responsible for hospitality. It was a social disaster. So, Mary brought the matter to Jesus' attention. Joseph isn't mentioned and scholars believe that Mary may have been a widow at this time.

Jesus' response to Mary seems harsh to the modern reader, but it's neither harsh nor rude. Jesus often respectfully addresses women with the greeting, "Woman." It's not warm and familial though, because Jesus also advises Mary that "My hour has not yet come." Jesus is respectful of his mother, but he makes it clear that he will receive divine instructions from God, not his mother. God must have nudged Jesus that a miracle for those at the wedding feast is an excellent sign of God's compassion and love. Perhaps Mary's prodding is like a catalyst for Jesus'

extravagant and abundant compassion. Perhaps it's like when we prod God in our prayers for God's extravagant and abundant compassion in our own times of need.

There's lots of detail about the miracle: the number of jars, their composition, their purpose, and their size. There were six large stone jars, able to hold 20 to 30 gallons each – that's 120 to 180 gallons of good wine in total! That's equal to 600 to 900 bottles of wine! This was a miracle of extravagant proportions. The chief steward recognizes the quality of the wine, but doesn't realize how it came to be or how God was involved in bestowing the gift. The steward is a bit like us today, recognizing good fortune, but not realizing the signs of God's presence or how God is involved in our lives.

In the Old Testament, an abundance of good wine symbolizes the joyous arrival of God's new age; an inaugural event of God's promised salvation. The large stone jars are for ritual cleansing; the stone cannot be defiled and they are to contain only clean water. They are not ordinary clay pots. However, they're empty, perhaps in an allusion to the emptiness of Jewish rituals that Jesus will challenge in his ministry.

The apostle John refers to Jesus turning water into wine as "the first of his signs." It's not just a miracle, but a sign from the Old Testament that points ahead to our salvation: to Jesus' "hour;" his death, resurrection and ascension to heaven. The wedding at Cana was "on the third day" after Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. The number three is always significant in the Bible and here at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, three days foreshadows the three days between his crucifixion and Easter resurrection at the end of his earthly ministry.

Turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana is the beginning of Jesus' self-revelation as the Son of God, a manifestation of God's power, and a glimpse of God's extravagant, abundant love for us. Like the steward, we can't explain it. It shatters conventional explanations and expectations. But like the disciples, we can see the extravagant abundance of good wine as a sign of God's extravagant, abundant love for us in the extravagant and abundant celebration of life and love that God wants for us.

Eric Sellgren tells a true account of a sign of God's extravagant, abundant love for us. A young widow named Mary only had her widow's pension to live on, plus a

little extra for work she did at home while looking after her young family. One Friday evening, Mary discovered a large tear in her oldest boy's jeans. She tried to patch them, but after a while she realised that the material was too thin and too worn to patch. She didn't have enough money for new ones.

That night she prayed, "Lord, it may be a very mundane thing to pray for, and I know you have greater things to attend to, but John's jeans won't last any longer, and I know that the children at school will laugh at him if he wears jeans with great patches and holes in them. Is it possible to have a new pair, Lord?" Then, it was as if a warm voice just behind her said: "Child, I'll show you whether a little boy's needs are too unimportant for me to trouble with!"

On Monday, Mary dressed the children for school with John in his patched jeans. Later, the postman came. There was a letter from her mother with a £5 note in it, "To buy John a new shirt as I forgot to get him one at Easter as I promised." Mary was delighted. Surely her mother wouldn't mind, if it were a pair of jeans rather than a shirt. She'd go to the store as soon as she finished the housework.

But, later that morning, a parcel arrived at the door, containing a pair of jeans! The note said, "I was in Manchester yesterday, and I thought of John, and posted them right away."

By the next week-end, Mary had received five pairs of jeans from friends all over the country who suddenly felt compelled to send them. Some were new and some were ones their own children had grown out of. Amazingly, each of them was just a little bit bigger than the last. John had jeans for about three years to come. The extravagant abundance of jeans is a sign of God's extravagant, abundant love for us.

At Cana, Jesus responds to our humble human needs with love. None of our needs are insignificant, and God has more gifts for us than we can imagine. God, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, is participating in our gladness and in our joy, loving to hear our laughter and the sounds of our celebration. God loves us extravagantly and abundantly to give hope and peace to the world, in lives filled with joy and celebration. Thanks be to God. Amen.