

Epiphany 2C  
John 2:1-11  
January 19, 2025

“A Flavorful Foretaste”  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’ 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. He said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it. 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), 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 did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.*

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In Rowan Atkinson’s hilarious retelling of this story, the Mr. Bean actor and comedian intones soberly:

And Jesus said unto the servants: 'Fill six water pots with water.' And they did so. And when the steward of the feast did taste from the water from the pots, it had become wine. And he knew not whence it had come.

But the servants did know. And they applauded loudly in the kitchen. And they said unto the Lord: 'How [on earth] did you do that?' And inquired of him: 'Do you do children's parties?' And the Lord said: 'No.' But the servants did press him, saying; 'Go on, give us another one!'

And so he brought forth a carrot, and said: 'Behold this, for it is a carrot.' And all about him knew that it was so. For it was orange, with a green top. And he did place a large red cloth over the carrot, and then removed it, and lo, he held in his hand a white rabbit. And all were amazed, and said: 'This guy is really good! He should turn professional.'

All joking aside, one does wonder why Jesus chose this particular sign to be his first of seven in John's Gospel. Unlike the three healings, the feeding of 5,000, walking on water to meet his disciples, and raising Lazarus from the dead, turning water into wine does feel somehow less – less altruistic, less impressive, less godlike – doesn't it? I mean, it's a cool trick and all, and it did show that Jesus wasn't opposed to people having a good time, but it didn't exactly change the world for anyone, did it? Not like healing a sick child, or paralytic, or blind man; not like miraculously feeding thousands; walking on water through a storm to reassure the disciples; or resurrecting the dead, right? Why this sign at that particular moment? And why on earth didn't he save those poor servants from hauling more than 100 gallons of water and just make water appear into the empty jars himself?! On the surface, many of these questions go

unanswered, but, as is so often the case, there is more here than meets the eye.

Sometimes stories from the Bible feel distant and foreign to us. Not today though. We all know that one of the first things you learn if you plan to do much entertaining is never to run out of food and drinks, right Mom?! In the first century, Jewish weddings were community-wide celebrations that could last up to a week, all on the groom's dime. Imagine the embarrassment of running out of wine so early in a celebration meant to last for days. Either the groom didn't plan very well, the entire guest list brought a plus one they'd forgotten to register, or he simply couldn't afford the party he was throwing. Either way, he and his parents would be subject to ridicule in the deeply honor-based culture of their day. Somehow, Mary learned of the predicament and shared the news with Jesus.

Jesus hemmed and hawed a bit when she told him, but ultimately relented. Scholars point out that in John's gospel, Jesus always hems and haws at the suggestions of his family members. Perhaps the author included this detail to show that Jesus was just like any other regular young guy, eager to distance himself from the authority of family and friends. Or, perhaps it was a reminder to the reader that Jesus' actions were always motivated by a higher purpose. Either way, he gave in and saved the groom and his family from the embarrassment of inadequate libations. In fact, he went way above and beyond, supplying the equivalent of around 500 bottles of the best wine the host had ever tasted.

But, as I mentioned earlier, John's gospel only describes 7 miracles. For comparison, Matthew includes 21 and both Luke and Mark have 18. What was so significant about this story that it warranted inclusion in John's rather spare accounting?

For John it's not really about the host of satisfied party-goers or even the groom and his parents saving face with their friends, family, and neighbors. No, this story relates something of profound importance for understanding the very nature of Jesus and his message: the centrality of abundance to Jesus' ministry. Jesus was the antithesis of the groom without enough. The abundance of good wine that Jesus provided foreshadowed not just the plentiful heavenly banquet to come, but Jesus' vision of plenty for all – here and now. Even the wine itself is a metaphor for grace – the abundant and overflowing grace that was the hallmark of Jesus' teaching. He even summarized his own purpose a few chapters later, saying, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." For John, understanding this sign is the first step to understanding Jesus. Abundance.

When we here at New England Church talk about radical welcome and extravagant hospitality, when we take up a collection for the food pantry or Hessed House, when we invite all to the table to share the bread of life and the cup of blessing, we are embodying the very essence of what John believed to be Jesus' own purpose: abundant life, here and now and for all. This same Jesus invited his followers to lives of abundance – of loving abundantly, and sharing abundantly, and caring abundantly, and abundant grace – of truly abundant living.

Turning water into wine was no mere party trick. Jesus tipped his hand. He showed his cards. Abundance. Abundant life. This is what Jesus was really about and it's what he invites us to share, with him, with one another, and with the world. He wouldn't want us to be fooled by or satisfied with cheap imitations, conditional love, reluctant sharing, false-hearted caring, or stingy grace. He wanted more than that for his followers and he expected more than that *from* them. May we experience his abundance and may we bear it forth for others, in our community and in our world. Amen.