

EPIPHANY TWO, YEAR C, JANUARY 19, 2025

There's an old story about an Italian trying to start a vineyard in Georgia. At the time the country was "dry" like most of rural Georgia so the County Commissioners, who were a group of good southern, evangelical Christians, were not keen on granting a permit for a wine making business.

The man was very confused by their attitude. He could not understand how making wine could be considered un-Christian. "After all," he said, "didn't Jesus turn water into wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee? Well, every good southern evangelical was very clear on the reality that though Jesus may have turned water into what they called wine it was not wine as we know it. It was really grape juice; the recipe for which was lost from Biblical times until the 1800s when a dentist and Methodist named Welch rediscovered it. Yes I said that with humor and tongue in cheek but Welch's grape juice was originally created as non-alcoholic communion wine.

Anyway, the head commissioner called for order and said, "Well, I have researched this thing and I have to say there was no such thing as unfermented grape juice in bible times. They didn't have the technology for it. Jesus really did turn the water into wine. . . .and I have to say that I've always been a little disappointed in the Lord for that!"

The story of turning water into wine at a wedding is very well known, and it has been used for a number of purposes. It is cited in the Episcopal wedding service for example as a way, I suppose, of saying that Jesus endorses marriage though as far as we know he never married anyone or taught about marriage. Catholics have turned the Cana story into a catechism for marriage as if Jesus' presence had made Cana a model of Christian marriage. None of this is in the story.

Others have suggested that this story was Jesus endorsing drinking and partying a bit even though some wish Jesus had turned wine into water. Somehow the idea of Jesus enjoying some wine, even though it was a standard drink, doesn't sit well with many people.

Then there is the issue of Mary being a nagging mother. Was Jesus ready for his ministry or was Mary pushing her son into doing what she thought was best for him. Was Jesus just placating her by turning water into wine?

But let's get serious. If the Wedding at Cana is not about marriage or drinking or a nagging mother, what is it about? What is John really getting at with this story? Is this story a miracle, or a sign as John prefers to call it. It certainly isn't like a healing, or rising from the dead, or feeding the 5000, or walking on water. It doesn't come with any easily discernible or easily applicable meaning. It's just this extraordinary thing that Jesus did turning ordinary water into wine.

But, knowing that John included this story in his gospel for a reason, we must ask the question – What are we expected to learn from this story if the fact that Jesus could turn water into wine is not the real point, then what is?

John is a writer whose work is full of symbolism. Unlike the other Gospel writers he makes no pretense that his is not an exact historical narrative of the life and ministry of Jesus. John's intent is to reveal to us spiritual truth through the use of stories.

A prevailing theme throughout John's gospel is the dawning of a new age. To John, the coming of Jesus as the Messiah has changed the world from what it used to be into something totally new and different.

This is why John prefers to use the word "signs" instead of the word "miracles." These things that Jesus did, like turning water into wine, were signs to the faithful that the new age of God dealing with the world had come.

So, what Jesus did was not about an obedient son reluctantly doing what his mother asked; nor was it about Jesus endorsing marriage or making sure the host of the wedding was not embarrassed by the wine running out, nor was it about making sure those attending the party were able to keep drinking.

What is really significant in this story that often gets overlooked is that the water Jesus used was the water that had been set aside for the Jewish purification rites. This water was not about being sanitary rather it was a religious ceremony or ritual cleansing to signify a kind of thanksgiving before God to make one holy. And now, John, so deft with symbols, basically is saying that Jesus is redefining Jewish laws, rituals, leadership and temple.

In this sign – Jesus takes the old- the ritual purification water and turns it into the new- fresh wine. It is important to realize that Jesus isn't taking the bad and turning it into good! Or the useless into the useful. Rather Jesus is taking the good things from the past and transforming them, changing them, into other good things for the future. Jesus is presenting us with God's abundance and new life.

This sign, this story of abundance, is a reflection of what Jesus' entire ministry represents. He is the sign of God's abundance. He represents a transformation and enhancement of the world's understanding of who God is and how God works.

The abundance in the details of this sign are meant to show us what grace looks like, smells like, tastes like, feels like, and sounds like. There's a reason for this sign being the first public act of Jesus' ministry in John and not a sermon or a healing but changing 120-180 gallons of water into the best wine. And just how many bottles are we talking about?. We're talking close to a 1000 bottles of wine. Why so much? An overflowing supply of wine is a biblical symbol for God's grace.

To the Jewish people of Jesus' day abundance of wine was a sign of the time when God would send a Savior for God's people and life would be grounded in mercy and hearts would be filled with joy because God was visibly working to redeem, to care for God's people. They believed that this time would be characterized by abundant food and wine, fertile fields and plenteous livestock, security and stability, even victory over enemies. Jesus revealed that abundance, but it was not to be a material abundance, nor was it to be an abundance of political power or military might.

No, what Jesus brought to this earth was abundant grace: And the 1000 bottles of the best wine shows just how much grace is implied here. Because this is an act of exaggerated grace, extravagant grace, excessive grace.

Grace is not a concept but the embodiment of God's love. Grace is not an idea but the experience of God's love. Grace is not something to be kept to ourselves but to go about demonstrating and sharing because God loves the world. This story shows us that God's grace is to be shared with others and that God's grace is for all.

You see, the Christian faith is not about the following of rules as if it was a prescription for a drug that has very specific guidelines or it won't be effective. The

Christian faith is about joy and abundance and sharing in that with all of our being. Like a copious amount of wine the Christian faith needs to invade all of our being so it can change us completely.

We are called to follow Christ, and that means we are called to the kind of extravagant generosity that boggles the imagination. We are called to commit outrageous acts of kindness, inspired by the inconceivable grace of our God. This is what this story is turning over to us. May this sign and more resound so greatly in our senses that all we are left with is the desire to be infused with joy, with hope, with forgiveness, that the promise of God's life changing grace gives us. Amen.