

"An Abundant Sign"

Rev. Rachel H. Vogado

January 20, 2019

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.

(John 2:1-11)

If you found yourself spending the first few weeks of January cleaning out your closets, pantries, and junk drawers, you might have had hopes to start the year off fresh with a clean sweep. Perhaps you decided it was finally time to go through papers you've held on to for far too long, or maybe that clean out that closet in the guest bedroom that you never use though its filled with things that you obviously don't use. Or did you finally go through and empty that last box that has somehow remain packed and taped up, even though you moved over a year ago? Maybe you filled up trash bags or boxes full of things to put to the curb or to donate to help someone else who might need it. Or maybe, you are like thousands of others, including me, who found themselves swept up in the tidying frenzy brought on by the Netflix show, the joy of tidying. This show, which features the quirky but helpful wisdom of Marie Kondo, is all about the Konmari method of tidying up and organizing, the self-named process of going through all of your belongings, finding a place for them, and only keeping the items that spark joy.

It is a freeing process to clear away the clutter, and many have noted the very helpful framing of keeping only what brings joy. We don't often do that you see. Our society says obtain more, buy more, get the next best thing, the one who has the most toys wins. We think that the more we have the more joy we will have, as if our happiness comes primarily from what we own and how much we physically have. But this show that has captivated so many is highlighting an alternative way to live. By getting rid of the clutter, keeping only what is necessarily, and what brings the most joy. And judging by the amount of folks in here who are currently smiling and nodding, I think you know you have been captured by this show. Even our executive presbyter, Jan Edmiston, has taken notice of this show. Earlier this week, in her blog in which she writes about matters of life, church, and theology, she wrote a post about Marie Kondo-ing church buildings. She wrote about church closets, and in her many years of church ministry, she has seen quite a few. She says often church closets look like they are overrun by hoarders and are filled to the brim with donated wheelchairs, old



70 Union Street North

Concord, NC 28025

(704) 788-2100

info@firstpresconcord.org

clothes, and dated non-perishables. There're holiday closets with half-melted candles and smashed wreaths. Or closets full of and, I quote, "bankers boxes of important records – like every bulletin used since the resurrection, ancient photos of Christmas Pageants Past with no identifying names or dates, rubber banded offering envelopes without the money but with names and numbers 'in case we need them someday.'"¹ Maybe this is all sounding a little bit familiar. Building off of a previous blog post in which Jan talked about the church's need to tidy up, through the practice of removing one long-held, possibly tired, church program each year, she said that the church could declutter or make space for what new thing the Holy Spirit could be doing in the church. And in cahoots with the Marie Kondo method, the church should take a good hard look at what sparks joy.

And joy should be easy to find in the church. The tradition of our faith, the history through our stories is one of healing and hope, community and belonging, mercy and love. Signs of God's love and promises are all around us, and it is our very calling to discipleship that invites us to share that love with others. That's what joy looks like- holding on to something so good that you can't help but share it with others. I think the writer of the Gospel of John understood that, which is why Jesus' ministry in this gospel begins with a joyful wedding feast. The only Gospel to feature this story, John chooses the wedding at Cana to be the starting point for Jesus' ministry, which provides important clues as to who Jesus is for the author. It is worth the pause to look at each gospel writer and ask why they chose a different story to mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry. For Matthew, it was the Sermon on the Mount, for Mark it was an exorcism, a healing. For Luke, it will be the return to his hometown to preach in the temple. Each story provides a different answer for who Jesus is and what he will do. For John, it is this wedding miracle, this turning water into wine, which is a sign that will point to a truer, deeper revelation about Jesus and who God is.

Remembering the words from the beginning of John's gospel, "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." This miracle of Jesus, this sign, shows us what that grace looks like, and it is grace abundant! As preacher Karoline Lewis writes and asks, "what if we take the incarnation seriously and suggest that once the Word becomes flesh, the rest of the Gospel shows you what grace tastes like, looks like, smells like, sounds like, feels like?"² Here it tastes like wine, the best wine, the kind of wine that should have been served at the beginning of the party, before everyone's tastes buds were dulled after days of celebrating and drinking. Our story begins on the third day of what would have most likely been a week-long wedding celebration in Cana, and Jesus is there with his mother and the disciples. And the wine has run out.

I don't know this statement incites any anxiety for you, but if you can imagine yourself the host of a large party, and the wine, the liquid wonder that ensures your guests have a good time, is gone. It won't be long before you see people start glancing at each other, yawning, looking toward the door, and saying it's time to head on home. Now if you're an introverted host, this is a great party tactic, but if you had hoped for the party of the season,

¹ Edmiston, Jan. "Marie Kondo-ing Church Buildings." *A Church for Starving Artists*. January 15, 2019, <https://achurchforstarvingartists.blog/2019/01/15/marie-kondo-ing-church-buildings/>

² Lewis, Karoline. "Commentary on John 2:1-11." *Working Preacher*. January 20, 2013, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1556

then this faux-pas will make your party legendary in the worst of ways. It's bad enough in our day and time, but in Jesus' time the inability to provide for all the guests' needs was a failure in hospitality that would bring serious shame on the wedding hosts. And there's another level of anxiety for the wine running out in this story. According to one writer, "it was an ancient custom for guests to bring wedding gifts in the form of food and drink to share the burden of providing for such a large group. Thus, the lack of the family's wine may indicate a lack of community support in addition to their own lack of resources."³

If you find this unfortunate event happening at your party, get yourself a Mary. Having the mother of Jesus as a guest at your party is a great way to ensure that your party can get right back on track. She goes to her son, saying, "they have no wine." Jesus, sounding like ever the petulant young adult son who might be embarrassed to be with his mom at a wedding replies, "woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." Undeterred Mary tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says. Mary knows exactly what her son is capable of; she knows that she has born the son of God after all. Sure, every mother thinks their child is a walking miracle, but in this case, it really is true. And eventually, despite his first inkling to protest, Jesus comes around and tells the servants to fill up the six stone jars for the Jewish rites of purification with water. After doing so, Jesus tells them to draw some out and take it to the chief steward, who upon tasting the water, went to the bridegroom asking why he had saved the good wine, the best wine, rather than serving it first. The wedding party is saved, the celebrations can continue, and with gusto, 180 gallons of gusto.

No one will be leaving thirsty, because the abundance and blessings are overflowing. And this miracle, this sign, reveals something about God's glory shown and shared through his actions. Offering the wine as a sign of shared hospitality, Jesus acts as both a friend and faithful community member, saving the wedding party and its hosts from the shame of running out, of not having enough to provide for the guests. By performing this sign, Jesus shows that the wine won't run out, because this wine is a sign of the harvest, it's a symbol of God's abundance, and joy and gladness, and it is there in abundance. This wine, once ordinary water in stone pots, is a symbol of extraordinary grace, a grace that overflows and won't run out. A grace that makes a party so good that you cannot help but invite others.

As one theologian writes, "Christians ought to be celebrating constantly. We ought to be preoccupied with parties, banquets, feasts, and merriment. We ought to give ourselves over to celebrations of joy because we have been liberated from the fear of life and the fear of death. We ought to attract people to the church quite literally by the fun there is in being a Christian."⁴ We have been given a great abundance, grace upon grace even, so much that we must share it with others. What a message this is for the church who often talk too much of scarcity. We look at our sometimes less than full pews and run to Jesus saying our equivalent of "we have no wine?" Do we feel a little embarrassed, perhaps like the wedding party scared it all might end on our watch? Could it be that actually what we consider the best as the church, God has not even begun to serve? Maybe what God is telling us in the church is fight the instinct to scrimp and save for a rainy day and instead double down and

³ Lewis, Karoline. "Abundance for All." *Working Preacher*. January 13, 2019, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5276>

⁴ Bartlett, David, L. *Feasting on the Word: Year C*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, 262.

go all in. Celebrate together, be loud, have potlucks, create a scene, dance, have free events, and trust God enough that when everything seems all done, that's when the party is really going to let loose. Because grace flows plentifully here, the Messiah turns our eyes to see him in the places of want, the places of real need, real scarcity and despair, so that we might take the abundance there to share and widen the party, to increase the guest list. For with Christ as the host, this is a banquet where all are invited.

At the wedding at Cana, Jesus turned water into wine, the first of his signs and revealed his glory. The story tells us that just a few people there were in on the full miracle- the disciples, the servants, and the mother of Jesus- they are the few with all details, but the overflowing jars of wine benefit all of the wedding guests. Those with the inside scoop respond with belief, but the rest of the community, they respond with wonder, and most likely with great joy. In John's gospels, signs are given as a gift, a gift of encouragement; they strengthen belief. Fast forward to after Christ's resurrection and the writer of John will say that it is a blessing to believe without seeing, but for other times there are signs given as a gift and a help. Perhaps you have felt the confidence that comes from witnessing something that you could only call a sign, if so then you have felt something of Christ's abundance. Or maybe you have seen something seemingly ordinary transform into something extraordinary; that is to know something of Christ's overflowing grace. Or perhaps it is a glass of wine at the end of a long hard day, or over a meal with someone you love. Or a tender touch from someone who cares about you when you are feeling lost or disconnected. When the stresses of the day rise and seem all too overwhelming, a side-splitting belly laugh with a good friend can be just the thing to remind you to catch your breath and breathe. Or maybe even a freshly organized junk drawer and tidied closet when the chaos seems to be all around you. When you have rejoiced in anything like that, you have experienced the joy of the abundance of Christ.

This gospel story, this good news, teaches us that Christ's glory can be revealed in the midst of an everyday event, a party, a meal, a gathering. Whenever Jesus is on the scene, and especially wherever there is a need, resurrection and abundance are just around the corner. Christ comes to us with extravagant gifts, gifts of relief, certainty, gladness, community, hospitality, gifts that spark wondrous joy. And they are in such abundance that there is more than enough to go around. For indeed, this joy from Christ can transform all of what we do. An ordinary hug can convey limitless love and connection. Even the smallest donation of food or money can be the change between scarcity and abundance. A listening ear or a kind word can ease a weary soul. Even a cleaned out church closet or retired program can be the catalyst for a new thing for church and the community, an invitation to the party that has been going on long before we even got here. So what will you share? And what story will you tell as a guest at this party? Thanks be to God for such an invitation, for a place to see and share such an abundance. Thanks be to God for this overflowing joy. Amen.