

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C, 2010
John 2: 1-11
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

In the Gospel today, we have an account of one of the best known of our Lord's miracle stories. We find the story only in John's gospel. In John's chronology, the changing of water into wine was our Lord's first miracle and it was the first time that Jesus gave any indication to his disciples, and to other observers, that he was the Messiah, and that the Messiah makes a difference in this world.

John's gospel is different from the other three. The other three are very much alike. John's comes from a different school in the early Church. One difference is that John's gospel is very rich in symbolism. John uses symbol in story to convey his Christology, his theology of Jesus. His account of the miracle at Cana, in Galilee, is just such highly symbolic story, and it tells us much about the nature of the Christ. It is the perfect story for John to begin his account of the life of Christ.

In John's account of this first miracle, Jesus and his friends, were invited to a wedding in Cana. Weddings, among the ancient Jews, were very big deals. And a wedding party in a small Jewish village was a very important social event. Much like couples today, the family went all out to impress their friends and neighbors. Cost was secondary when it came to weddings, and impression mattered a lot. If something went wrong at a wedding, not just the husband and wife, but the families on both sides would live with that embarrassment for the rest of their lives. Any number of things, of course, can go wrong at any social function. But next to the groom standing up the bride, which would have been unheard of in our Lord's time, the worst possible thing that could go wrong would be to run out of food or of wine. Have that happen, and the families of the bride and groom would never live it down. And, guess what happened at this wedding!

Now people for the entire history of the Church have tried to figure out how it could be that the people hosting this party could underestimate the amount of wine needed. Did more come than invited? Did people drink too much? Another question is why our Lord's mother, Mary, was aware of the problem before it unfolded and was so concerned. Some have suggested that these folks were relatives of Jesus and Mary was in charge of the planning and preparation. This would certainly explain her anxiety, but these types of questions are barking up the wrong tree. If nothing else, Saint John uses this event to set the stage to introduce Jesus as Messiah. What is important to note is that God in Christ, because of no reason but love, intervened to turn calamity around and, without consideration of merit, no thought about the failure to plan, Jesus showered the family with love.

I said at the beginning that John's gospel is rich in symbolism. The first symbol is the story itself. To unpack it, understand that we are the family in the story, helpless and unprepared through our own fault, but God is a god of love, and God so loved the world

that he sent his only begotten son who showers us with love, with grace, and saves us from ourselves.

But, as I said, the symbolism here is rich, strong and abundant. Lets look at these symbols. There were six stone jugs of water, in place in the story for the Jewish rite of purification. The rite of purification was ritual washing of the hands before one ate, and a ritual washing of the vessels from which one ate. The rite of purification, in this story, symbolically represents all of the Jewish law. There were six stone jugs. The number is important. There were six. No house would have more than one jug for the rite of purification, so John's claim that there were six is exceptional and brings out a very important point. In Jewish and early Christian symbology, seven is the number of completion. We see this over and over, seven days to create the world, seven days in the week, seven candles on the Menorah, seven sacraments. The number six is incomplete. John was saying that which Jews considered perfect, Torah, the Law of Moses, was lacking. Torah, John said, was insufficient. To be complete, the Law required fulfillment in the Messiah, who alone brings the grace of redemption.

There were six stone jugs, each containing twenty or thirty gallons, according to John's Gospel. Thirty times six? That is 180 gallons of wine, on top of all that the guests had already drunk. That is a lot of booze no matter how you look at it, but set that observation on hold! John's point was that the grace of Jesus Christ is not just sufficient, it is abundant - more than we could ever expect, more than we deserve. And, it never runs out.

For John's readers, this story brought powerfully to their minds their understanding of Eucharist. The wine would represent for them the blood of Christ abundantly shed for our salvation. They would have understood that the grace of God's love through the gift of his son Jesus Christ is sufficient for our every need. They would have understood, also, that merit on the part of the recipient of God's grace is not the issue. The story demonstrated that God's grace is freely given, regardless of merit, and is unconditionally given just because God loves us. They would also have understood that God's grace is so abundant that there is more than enough to share. We cannot contain God's grace, we can't ration it out, nor do we need to nor should we want to. We want to pass it around. We want to pass it on. We want to share it with the world.

This is, of course, what John's readers did and because they did we are Christians today. Our challenge, our calling, as individuals, as a parish and as a denomination in the Christian community is to do likewise, to know Christ and to make him known, and to do it in the way that we do best, by bringing people into our Eucharistic community where they may know the grace of Christ in the liturgy and in the fellowship of this church.

Amen.