

Like a Picture from *Where's Waldo*
January 16, 2022

When I was a kid, my cousins and I used to complain a lot. I've mentioned in a sermon before how we could be hiking through a national park with some of the most beautiful scenery in the world surrounding us, and we'd complain that our feet hurt.

One day, my uncle had finally had enough, and he said, "Andrew, do you want some cheese?"

I was surprised and said, "What? Why?" to which he replied, "to go with your whine!"

It was a terrible joke, but (a) it got me laughing (and thus put me in a better mood), and (b) I now had a new go-to joke the next time I heard someone complaining.

Some cheese with your whine.

Today, there is no cheese in our Gospel story, but there certainly is some wine (both kinds). The account of Jesus changing water into wine is a well-known story and one that is rich with symbolism. So let's look.

The story begins with Jesus, his disciples, and his mother Mary attending a wedding. Mary somehow finds out that the host has run out of wine. Now anyone who has hosted a party, a dinner, a wedding knows the fear of running out of something. You want the guests to be happy and have enough, so it's embarrassing if something runs out. Not only will the guests be displeased, but the lack of planning doesn't reflect well on you, the host, either.

Take that anxiety, and double it, and that's maybe the level of anxiety and humiliation that the wedding host would be experiencing in first-century Palestine. Because hospitality was one of the most important priorities, and so for a host to run out of something like wine was incredibly embarrassing.

So the scene is set: there's no more wine at this wedding in Cana. Somehow, Mary has found out about this, and she goes to Jesus. It's unclear if Mary knows that Jesus can do something about it, or if she just wants him to go into town and buy some wine.

Jesus responds that this is not their concern, and his words do sound disrespectful (especially calling his mother "woman"), but they are not. It would be like someone addressing a woman, "My Lady." It's a term of respect, which our translation doesn't capture. Jesus is simply saying to his mother respectfully that the lack of wine isn't their concern.

But Mary is not content. She seems to give Jesus a nudge by going around him and telling the servants, "Listen up! Jesus here will tell you what to do." I imagine her shoving Jesus out on stage.

No turning back now. Jesus points to some large water jars nearby. We hear that these containers were used for ritual purification. It was the custom (and the Jewish law) that before

folks ate, they would wash their hands and sometimes the dishes and cups that they used. The servants fill these water jars “to the brim,” almost to overflowing.

And then, when one of the servants, draws some water out, he finds that it has been transformed into wine. And not only that, but it’s good wine, as we hear when the steward talks to the groom. The reputations of the steward and groom are saved; they no longer have to worry about the wine running out. And the party continues.

Then, in closing, we hear that this is the first sign Jesus performed. Miracles to John weren’t just wonderful acts of healing or feeding in themselves; they were evidence pointing to the truth that Jesus was and is the Son of God.

But the transformation of water into wine isn’t the only clue to Jesus’ identity here. This is where it gets interesting. This story is like a *Where’s Waldo* picture: the closer you look, the more neat details you see. There are a lot of subtle hints that point to Jesus’ identity and even his future.

For example, how does our story begin? It’s not an accident that these events take place on “the third day,” as John says. Before this story, John has been describing the previous few days and how Jesus called a few of his disciples, and John could’ve very easily started this section by saying, “The next day…” But instead that “third day” immediately brings to mind the resurrection.

It’s not an accident that this miracle takes place at a wedding. Marriage is a popular image to describe the relationship between God and God’s people. We heard in our first reading from Isaiah: God and God’s people have a bond like a married couple – full of love and rejoicing. Throughout Paul’s writings, he compared Christ and the Church to a married couple.

It’s not an accident that the water jars were meant for Jewish purification rites. In his first miracle, Jesus is demonstrating that the laws that governed the religion would be reimagined, even re-purposed, for celebration and joy.

It’s not an accident that the water was changed into wine, of all things. Wine was a symbol of celebration, but of course, but it also becomes a symbol for Jesus’ blood and his death. The water and wine together might bring to mind Jesus’ crucifixion, when a soldier pieces Jesus’ side, and what comes out? Water and blood.

It’s not an accident that Mary is present for this episode, the first miracle of Jesus, the beginning of his ministry… and that she is present at the end, at the cross, for the last moments of Jesus’ life.

And it’s not an accident that Jesus procures a humongous amount of wine, something like 150 gallons. This is a display of God’s abundance, that when our lives seem plagued by scarcity, God’s abundance is always present. And out of God’s abundance can come happiness, community, even celebration, like at the wedding in Cana.

It's a rich story. Lots of symbolism. And I have to say, out of all those symbols, the abundance and the celebration are what speak to me the most right now.

It feels like we are, as Jackson Browne put it, running on empty. We are out of wine, so to speak; there is little cause of celebration these days. It is a tough season that we are in. Part of it is the winter doldrums – Christmas is over; it's still cold and dark outside. And part of it is the difficulty of omicron and wondering whether life will ever return to some sense of normal. It doesn't feel like there's much to celebrate.

And so this story of the wedding in Cana reminds us that out of the ordinary, everyday things like water, out of uncertainty and anxiety at running out of wine for guests, comes God's abundance... if we can muster it up.

The past couple weeks, I've started re-reading some books that I read in middle school. The books were written in the 1980s and 1990s. And I was surprised when characters in the book would burst out laughing. Or they'd randomly break out in song. And then I was taken aback that spontaneous singing and laughing seemed so foreign. Have our lives become that dreary, that onerous, that we can't burst out laughing anymore?

I hope not. Because as we see in the wedding at Cana, God is at work in the partying and celebration. Jesus laughed and joked during his life. We tend to read the Gospel with a very serious lens, but Jesus often exaggerates and jokes and pokes fun when he teaches.

So I hope you find reasons to laugh this week. To smile. To joke. Because while God is found in times of difficulty and trial, God is also found in smiles and singing and celebration.

Amen.

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