

What Grace Tastes Like
Isaiah 55:1-2, John 2:1-11
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The story of Jesus changing water into wine is so well-known that people who have never cracked a Bible know this story. What is it about this story that makes it so compelling?

As someone who has officiated many, many weddings and therefore attended many, many wedding receptions, I love this story. Things can and do go wrong at weddings. Families have spent thousands of dollars to create an idyllic day, filled with beauty and perfection. Couples vow to love each other to the end of their days and to act lovingly even when they don't feel like it. No promise could be more extravagant. The family will spend more time prepping for and having their photos taken than the actual event takes. And then comes the wedding reception, where people get to set down the bouquets, take off their suit jackets and dance. All the nervous tension of the day slides off people. The celebration has begun! Having attended dozens of wedding receptions I would offer this advice to couples: an open bar and an open mike is a disastrous combination....and has given me multiple good stories to tell over the years.

The story of Jesus at the wedding in Cana is found in the second chapter of John. It smacks up against all the poetry of John 1: "In the beginning was the Word...the Word became flesh and lived among us....full of grace and truth." After those words are spoken, Jesus calls out disciples and then herds them off to a wedding. He shows up with more than just a plus-one.

That is where we meet his nameless mother. The Gospel of John never tells us her name and we only meet her twice....here in the story of the wedding reception in Cana and at the foot of the cross as her son is dying, when Jesus entrusts his mother to his Beloved disciple. Neither time does he call her "mom". He calls her "woman". She is present for his first sign and then again for his last breath....for a time of celebration and the day of great anguish. Her presence brackets his ministry on Earth.

It is Jesus' mother who finds him when the wine runs out at this wedding reception. She tells him about the situation with a face of expectation. In an honor/shame culture, it would have been shameful to run out of wine at such a public celebration. But who would carry the shame? In this ancient culture it was traditional for the guests to bring gifts of food and wine to the wedding to help share the burden of hospitality required of the family. Does the lack of wine speak of a lack of community support or the poverty of the family and friends or the fact that Jesus had the audacity to show up to the wedding with a whole band of strangers in tow? "Woman, this is not your problem or my problem," Jesus says. But with a face that makes it clear the decision has already been made, his mother turns to the servants and says, "Do whatever he instructs you to do." And so, Jesus performs his first sign with absolute abandon. The result is around 180

gallons of excellent wine. His new disciples were amazed. The party...the feast...the dancing continues.

It seems like such an odd first sign, doesn't it? It is unusually private and subdued in the midst of a big party. This isn't feeding over 5,000 people with a few loaves of bread and a couple fish. This isn't bringing sight to the blind. It isn't flashy. Only a few people were in on it and Jesus did it reluctantly and under coercion. Why does John begin the story of Jesus ministry this way? Luke has him going home to Nazareth to preach his first sermon...a sermon so radical that his childhood friends try to throw him off a cliff in anger. Matthew and Mark have Jesus' ministry begin with his baptism and a voice from heaven naming Jesus as the Son of God. But John starts Jesus' ministry with him changing water into wine...the kind that you wouldn't find in a box.

Once again, the Gospel of John sticks out like a sore thumb. As I mentioned earlier, this gospel starts with beautiful, liturgical poetry. Grace is mentioned four times in the Gospel of John and every one of those instances is in the first chapter. When we get to chapter two, it is as if John is saying to us, "Now let me show you what grace looks like, acts like, tastes like." This isn't grace cloaked in piety and wrapped in ethereal mystery. John sets Jesus' signs in the ordinariness of human events...a wedding reception, a picnic on a hillside, a boat on a lake. The Word becomes flesh and enters our world in the midst of human occurrences. Grace arrives into the common, regular, everyday stuff of life. It shows up where the wine has run out; the sermon becomes a picnic; fright turns to relief. It shows up where it is least expected...undeserved and unearned.

The author of John would have been familiar with the text from Isaiah 55 that was read to us this morning.

Come you who thirst and have no money.

Come buy wine without money and without price.

This scripture echoes in our ears as we watch the events develop in Cana. This is what grace tastes like.

Most of the time we just talk about grace. We speak of it as a theological concept. But John says that because the Word became flesh we can see grace, we can taste it, we can imitate it. Grace put on skin and showed us how to be people of grace.

Today we are going to take communion together. We are invited to taste and see the goodness of God. Jesus invited us to remember him every time...every time we eat or drink...every time. He made the tables of our lives into the most sacred space. When you sit down to your vegan pozole or you double-double from In-n-Out may you eat and drink in remembrance of Christ. Receive grace without payment or worthiness on your part. Taste and experience the goodness of God. For Jesus took these ordinary moments of life and permeated them with meaning.

The ironic thing to me about communion is that this moment that should unite us as followers of Christ has become a place of controversy and boundaries. When Jesus created this sacred table of grace, he knew he was sharing this meal with one who

would deny him, one who would betray him, and all the others would abandon him....and he offered it to them, nonetheless. To the unworthy and undeserving he gave an abundance of love....that is what grace tastes like.

But over the centuries we have made so many rules about who can serve communion and who can take it. The table of grace has become a table of the elite...a table of exclusion. Nothing could be further from the intent when Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me."

Friends, today you are invited...not to the table of the worthy but to the table of the precious...the loved....the table of grace. Bring your whole self, even the parts that you try to hide from others and hide from God. Bring your anxiety, your shame, your grief, your sins. Bring your joys, your satisfactions, your dance floor wild self, also. Bring all of you to this table....not because you deserve it but because at this table you can bring every piece of your life...the whole and the broken pieces. Here you will receive, without need for payment or due to merit, the very taste of grace. Amen.