

Grace Upon Grace

On this second Sunday after Epiphany, John treats us to Jesus performing the first sign of his public ministry, transforming water into wine at a wedding. We don't know who got married, but his mother's presence supports the traditional supposition that this wedding was a family affair. At first, Jesus doesn't seem to share his mother's concern when the wine runs out. It's been just three days since his baptism, he's only called four of his disciples, and he's not yet ready to reveal himself to the world. He responds rather impertinently when she tells him that the hosts are out of wine. "Woman, what concern is that to you or to me?" Some commentators insist that Jesus's words weren't as harsh as they sound, but it's disturbing to hear our Lord talk back to his mother. Mary seems unfazed by it, though. She calmly tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says and, as she clearly expects, her son turns six vats of water into about a thousand bottles' worth of excellent wine. So, what just happened? The Reverends Eric C. Fistler and Robb McCoy of the *Pulpit Fiction* podcast agree that Mary must have given Jesus the "Mom look." We all know that look – it's how mothers tell their disobedient children, "okay, kiddo, you've had your fun. Now, knock it off and do what's right." Brief as it is, this exchange tells us a lot about Jesus's relationship with his mother, and more about Jesus himself.

Unlike Luke, John never calls Mary by name. He identifies her only as "the mother of Jesus," and he mentions her just twice – here, at Jesus's first public miracle, and again at the foot of the Cross, bookending Jesus's ministry with her presence. John tells us in the first chapter of his Gospel that Jesus was with the Father from the beginning. We know that Jesus returns to the Father after the Resurrection. But Jesus isn't exclusively the Father's Son. From the beginning to the end of his ministry, Jesus is also Mary's son, as human as he is divine. As the Reverend Karoline M. Lewis observes in her commentary on John's Gospel, Mary is a nurturing force the

entire time that Jesus, the disembodied Word of God, lives as a human being. “Just as he has needed and will need his Father, now, during his three years of ministry, he needs his mother.”

In John’s Gospel, Jesus never seems to have the slightest uncertainty about who he is and what he intends to accomplish. Still, he hesitates to reveal himself until his mother nudges him into the spotlight. Reverend Lewis writes, “[t]here is a sense here that the mother of Jesus is the one who is encouraging Jesus to be who he is, as if she is saying to him, as a mother would say to her kindergartener getting on the bus for the first time, ‘Come on, you can do it. Get on the bus! You are going to have a great day!’” Mary seems to have more confidence in Jesus than he has in himself. We can wonder how much she knew about her extraordinary son, what she had already seen in him, and why she was so sure her boy would know just what to do to prevent a calamity. Wedding celebrations went on for days in Jesus’s community, and the hosts were expected to have plenty of wine on hand. Jesus spared his mother’s family lasting humiliation when he gave them more good wine to share than their guests could possibly drink. Her absolute trust in him suggests to me that Mary and Jesus loved each other dearly, making his sassy retort just the affectionate teasing of a devoted son.

“Epiphany” means appearance or revelation, which is why we celebrate Jesus’s revelation to the Gentiles (represented by the wise men) with the Feast of the Epiphany. The weeks following that feast aren’t a formal ecclesiastical season, but they invite us to consider the implications of revelatory moments in Jesus’s ministry. This morning, Jesus reveals himself with a miracle that exemplifies God’s abundant generosity, what John refers to in the first chapter of his Gospel as “grace upon grace.” And he does so not in the Temple courtyard or at a royal banquet, but at a modest wedding in a humble country village. This first miracle reveals Jesus’s abiding love for ordinary people and God’s eagerness to bless our everyday lives. And let’s not

forget that this miracle took place in an occupied nation. Rome had conquered Israel, cruelly oppressing God's chosen people. Nonetheless, their lives went on despite the Romans. People still fell in love and got married. There were still wedding feasts. And there was still a need for the abundance of excellent wine that Jesus so generously provided.

So, to borrow Jesus's expression, what's all that to you and to me? We can take several things away from the miracle at Cana. First, as Reverend Lewis writes, "[Mary's] presence ... suggests that one of the primary aspects of having a relationship with Jesus and, therefore, with the Father, will be dependence. A central characteristic of discipleship is dependence on Jesus." We often think of discipleship as "a certain level of independence and fortitude, of apostleship and mission, of flailing and failure." This miracle encourages us to welcome a relationship with Jesus and gratefully accept our dependence on him. Self-reliance limits what we can accomplish; despite our best efforts, sometimes the wine runs out. But if, like Mary, we trustingly depend on Jesus, it opens the door for him to shower us with grace upon grace. Miracles can happen.

Second, the blessings of this life give us reason to believe in God's goodness. When you think about it, the fact that anything exists at all really is miraculous. It's easy to get so caught up in our disappointments that we ignore our blessings, take them for granted or, worse, reject them because they're not what we had in mind. Imagine if, after tasting that wine, the steward had said, "this is a decent red, but chardonnay would have paired better with the roasted pigeon." It sounds unthinkable rude, but people refuse and belittle God's gifts all the time. The disciples saw Jesus's miracle and believed. We're called to do the same, and it's healthier for us to believe without demanding that every act of God be just what we wanted. Red wine is a blessing, too.

Third, God's gifts to us are meant to be shared. The gallons of wine that Jesus created would have quickly turned to vinegar if the bridegroom had stashed it all away for future

consumption instead of serving it to the wedding guests. As Paul reminded the Corinthians, the Holy Spirit gives a variety of gifts to different people for the common good. If those gifts were all identical, or if the people who received them refused to share, everyone would be the poorer for it. We're called to be generous with our own God-given gifts, and to encourage others to bravely step out and offer up whatever gifts the Holy Spirit has manifested in them. We never know what miraculous thing will happen if everyone contributes what they have.

Finally, the miracle at Cana proves that our God loves celebration. Jesus chose to perform his first miracle at a joyful wedding, not at a sorrowful funeral. Sobriety is essential to good health; I don't believe God ever wanted his children to drown their pain in drink or drugs. Repentance is essential to good spiritual health, too, but I don't believe God wants his beloved children to live under a permanent cloud of shame, sorrow, and fear. Life is a gift that God wants us to enjoy. People who endlessly threaten God's children with hellfire and damnation are, in my opinion, just trying to assert power over others that belongs to God alone. When they tried to crush his people, Jesus stood up to the tyrants of his time with healing, hope-filled teachings, and joyous miracles. We can, and should, take a lesson from that.

There will always be people who want to rule over others by forcing them into obedient misery. There will also always be reason to rejoice in the God-given blessings of our lives, no matter what would-be dictators do. Granted, the world sometimes feels like a dark and dangerous place. When we're threatened with oppression or despair, celebration can be an act of radical defiance of which, I believe, Jesus wholeheartedly approves. So, stand up to the bullies of this world by embracing the grace upon grace that Jesus offers. Find your reason to rejoice – there are many, I promise you – drink a toast with wine or water as your health permits and say a heartfelt “Alleluia anyway.” Christ is alive and grace upon grace abounds. Amen.