

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, C
Isaiah 62:1-5
Church
Psalm 36:5-10
I Corinthians 12:1-11
John 2:1-11

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At our house there's a closet where we've stored twelve one-gallon water jugs like this. That's how much water they say you need to meet the needs of a family of four for three days, in case of emergency. In our pantry there's a big blue plastic tub that's packed with flashlights and candles and first aid supplies and also can openers in case we need to feed ourselves from the food on the pantry shelves, if there's an emergency.

No, we haven't gone survivalist. I got all these things together back around the time of Hurricane Katrina, when my Mama Bear instincts kicked in. You know — the instinct to protect and provide for your family in all circumstances, no matter what. A friend down the street had it worse than I did. She bought an inflatable raft and stored it in her garage. That's because her kids went to school on the other side of the river, and if the bridges were down, she wanted to be sure she could get across to them.

It's part of being a parent— that instinct to provide for the people who belong to you. Wanting to be able to give them everything they need, no matter what.

And what happens when all your best efforts fail? What happens when the supplies run out? When you can't give them what you want to give, or even the basics of what they need?

Of course I have the people of Haiti on my mind this morning, and so do you. They couldn't have prevented the earthquake, no matter how many emergency kits they had on hand. And now their supplies are running out. I heard a report about how desperate people are. Three Haitian police officers were patrolling in the neighborhoods, everywhere meeting people pleading for water and food and medical help. All the police could say was, "We are here, we're here with you. But we don't have anything to give you."

Most of the reports from Haiti focus on what is lacking since the earthquake, and what was lacking even before. They bring to our awareness the deep needs in our human family, and they cause us to wonder what we can do, when the needs are so great.

In our gospel reading, people came to Jesus in a time of need. Their need might seem trivial in comparison to the needs in Haiti, but Jesus considered it important enough to make it the occasion of his first miracle in the gospel of John.

It wasn't a big public miracle. It was something that happened in the pantry, as it were, back where the womenfolk were helping provide for a wedding feast. Not many people saw the miracle happen, or even knew about it, but everyone felt its effects.

Wedding feasts like this one were major events in a Middle Eastern village, because they signified two families entering into a new alliance. The whole village would be invited, and the honor of the host was very much at stake in how well things went. The feasting usually went on for seven days, but in this case it was only three days before the wine ran out — a serious problem that could ruin the entire family's reputation. You had to have wine for a wedding. Not only was it the usual drink for any kind of meal, but it was a symbol of joy and abundance and hospitality — and hospitality was a core value in that culture. Not to provide for your guests was an outrage! The host would be seen as such a failure he could no longer hold his head up in his own village.

Now, a lot of people cast Mary as a pushy mother in this story, but it was quite natural for her to tell Jesus what was needed. These feasts were such a big undertaking that friends and neighbors had a cultural obligation to help each other out by donating food and drink. Still, Jesus didn't automatically do what Mary wanted. First, he took a step back: "Woman, what concern is it to us?" He wasn't being rude— calling her "Woman" was polite speech. But he was making it clear that he would make his own decisions about when to act. Jesus wasn't beholden to custom, or to parents, or to anyone except God. And God would say when his "hour had come" to do his saving work. (*Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Malina/Rohrbaugh, Fortress, 1998)

But Jesus did act. And not with measly little one-gallon water jugs, but with huge stone water jars that stood as tall as your waist and held up to 30 gallons. There were six of them, probably borrowed from neighbors for the big occasion. And Jesus took all the water they could hold, and turned it into wine. Excellent wine. The very best.

When the people didn't have enough, Jesus responded. And not just with enough -- he gave them outrageous abundance. 120 gallons of wine? 180? That's way more than enough. Not to get anybody drunk (the Bible considers that a disgrace) but to satisfy the thirst of the whole village for many more days, so the feast could go on.

This was more than just a kind gesture from Jesus. It was something highly symbolic. Jesus provided more and better wine than anyone expected, a sign that God had “saved the best till last,” that through Jesus and his ministry, God would make things happen that had never happened before.

Where there was lack and need, Jesus brought abundance, to all of us. It’s not just that people need food and water and shelter, all of which God provides through the bounty of creation. On top of those physical necessities, we need to be part of a human family healed by the power of love and made whole.

Which is exactly what Jesus came to do — to lead all of us into abundant life in the family of God. The life that really is life. The life that is full and rich and meaningful, the life that contains hope and love and joy. The life of forgiveness, between us and God, and us and other people, the life where we let go of bitterness and build one another up in love. The life of generosity, where we don’t hoard what we have but share in the spirit of service.

You’ve heard me talk about it often before, it’s such a central theme of scripture, how God calls us away from a mindset of scarcity, which is small with fear and self-protection. How God calls us into God’s reality of abundance, where we live with trust toward God and open hands toward others. This is not just positive thinking. It is living into the reality of God’s kingdom. It is living the new life God gives us, in trust toward God every step of the way.

A lot of people these days know what it feels like to be in need, not to have enough. They worry about providing for themselves and their families. More and more people are visiting food pantries, where the shelves have been stocked with canned goods for use in hard times.

With all that we do to provide for ourselves, there are times when it is not enough. But the truth is, it would never be enough, even if we had millions of dollars and great big mansions. Without our Lord we would not have enough to live the life God created for us.

But when we are in relationship with God through Christ, there is enough. We have what we need. And as the African American church says, God makes a way where there is no way. We place our trust in this, and we give our talents and efforts to God, to make that way. Our outlook is different, our actions are different, we are different as children of God.

Because with God, there is enough. And not just in a spiritual sense. There is enough for all people in need, when people act out of God’s abundance to share and

serve others, in Christ's name. When the whole village combines its efforts, like they did to make that wedding feast happen, then there is enough.

Both of the young Americans I know of, who were killed in the earthquake in Haiti, had gone there beforehand to help. They went there specifically to share the abundant life they had received in Christ. Benjamin Larson was a Lutheran seminary student teaching at a theological conference for Haitian leaders, and Molly Hightower, who went to college here in Portland, was volunteering with orphans. They both seem to have been full to the brim and overflowing with the abundance of God. And we've been reading and hearing about many more people volunteering their skills for rescue or medical help or to deliver needed items, like jugs of water and meals ready to eat...

They are not stashing away their supplies, they are sharing them, and that is what this kingdom of God, this fellowship in Christ, is all about. That's what it means to be children of God, to be linked with the whole family of humanity as ones who belong to the most expansive, sheltering parent of them all.

I guess you could say God is driven by the greatest Mama Bear instinct of all. God's driving instinct is to gather God's children in, to make us one, to give all people the life that really is life. And God has gone to the greatest lengths to do that, through Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus has given us what we need, and more, more than enough. The abundant life. We live it to God's glory. Amen.