

Second Sunday after Epiphany, C
Isaiah 62:1-5
I Corinthians 12:1-11
John 2:1-11

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A friend of ours recently began a new chapter in life. She moved to a smaller home in a retirement community, and it's been interesting to notice the different ways people have welcomed her to this new neighborhood. On the one hand, she says many neighbors have been really friendly, bringing homemade treats and inviting her to community events in the clubhouse. Their actions are expansive, they open up the happy possibility that neighbors could become friends, and that as time goes on, she will find a place to belong in this new life of hers.

On the other hand, there's one guy who's starting to get on her nerves (there's always one guy). He thinks of himself as the neighborhood rule-keeper and feels it's his duty to instruct this newbie on all the homeowner association regulations. If she puts up Christmas lights, he stops by to tell her what day they have to come down. When she rolls her garbage bins out to the curb, he reminds her when they need to be taken back in. Parking rules, yard signs, he's annoyingly eager to instruct her. What he offers is not so much welcome as indoctrination: *"This is how we do things here. You need to fit in."*

Which approach do you think fills our friend with more hope and possibility for this new life of hers?

First impressions do matter. Today we hear of Jesus' first public action in John's gospel, when Jesus welcomes people into new life with God. And it's significant that he doesn't begin by laying down rules and expectations of what it means to follow in God's way. Instead Jesus works a beautiful miracle of community and abundance. The wine is running out at a village wedding feast, and Jesus replenishes it with more wine than they could ever drink, and better wine than they have ever tasted. Jesus makes it possible for the village celebration to go on and on, for relationships and community to flourish, and for people to fully enjoy their God-given life on this joyful occasion.

This generous miracle spurs us to imagine what is possible in friendship with God -- gifts of community and belonging and reasons for joy, gifts of purpose and meaning and an outreaching, generous mission to share God's holy abundance with every living being.

To some, Jesus' miracle might seem frivolous. With so many people hungry or homeless or sick, why is Jesus filling up wine jars for people who've already been feasting for

several days? But it was a legitimate crisis for these wedding hosts. The eyes of everyone in the village were on them, and to run out of wine would bring shame on the family. They would never live it down! So Jesus used his power to keep the party going. In a time when life was hard for most people, a wedding was a new beginning. Jesus kept that feast going with enough celebration and togetherness to launch this newly-married couple into all the joys and struggles that would lie ahead of them, and allow every guest to leave somehow renewed in the power of love.

It was a beautiful, warm, human gift for Jesus to give, and it was also a symbol of something much greater – the first of Jesus’ signs, to show God’s glory.* A sign is something that points beyond itself, and this sign points to how God is bringing all humankind into relationship with Godself. It reveals Jesus as the one who brings God’s abundant life – life that’s full of joy, full of blessing, full of connection, everything that makes life good.

And it reminds us of all the other times when scripture pictures our relationship with God as a joyful feast. The prophet Isaiah envisions how one day when all oppression is ended and all evil overcome, God will set a great feast for all peoples on God’s holy mountain (Isaiah 25:6), a feast of fine food and the best wine flowing freely, when tears and crying and mourning will be no more. God will set a feast for all people, not just some, not just the people of Israel but all nations. God’s intentions are that grand. Can we imagine that?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of justice as a celebration feast. He preached, *“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.”* (March on Washington, 1963) Can you see it? God’s intention is to bring all people together in the Creator’s love, in a relationship where injustice simply does not compute – because every person is honored as a child of God, and belonging to each other is what matters, and our thirst is for every person to have the fullest life possible.

We call Holy Communion a “foretaste of the feast to come” because when we share the bread and wine, God draws us into this feast that knits all people together in God’s heart. Just a taste of bread and sip of wine reveal how we are related to God, and how we are related to each other.

At that wedding feast in Cana, we should notice that the miraculous new wine Jesus made is intended for everyone. Not just the most honored guests, with cheap stuff served to those of lower rank. That miraculous wine is for all people. And it is the best

wine anyone has ever tasted. Because the best thing in life is being in relationship with God – all people together. Just imagine that!

God's abundance is for all people, because this is 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. The life of justice, where we don't only care about getting ours, but seeing that all people have what they need to thrive.

God calls us away from a mindset of scarcity, which is small with fear and self-protection. God calls us into God's reality of abundance, where we live with trust toward God and open hands toward others. Jesus welcomes us into a life that is always new in the sense that it is so different from how the world operates. We are always being made new as we live in God's way and learn what possibilities it holds.

The miracle at Cana is a signpost to keep the feast of faith going, generation after generation. To help all of us continue to trust in God when faith is difficult, and sustain our relationship with God when it is threatened.

And that is really good news in a time like ours. Because in so many ways it can feel like possibilities are shutting down – again – in this phase of the pandemic. We are once again being limited by the virus in ways we hoped to be beyond, by now.

It's a little bittersweet today, to imagine a big wedding feast with food and drink and dancing and laughter and song. We really long for those gatherings, but we have scaled down our expectations, and when we do manage to enjoy a small family event for a special day, or coffee with a friend, or a memorial service to honor a loved one, it feels like a special blessing and a rare gift.

This week a dear friend wept because this person lives on their own and just cannot bear the thought of isolating alone again – social events are a literal lifeline for them. Another grieved a long-planned vacation to tropical paradise, now cancelled. The milestone birthday of another will not be celebrated in Europe after all. And family after family is gritting its teeth, again, to get through this current surge, praying strength and resilience for teachers and health care workers, and elders and more.

Yes, we have learned to scale down our expectations, and yet -- God explodes our expectations this morning by inviting us to participate in a really fine feast, an extravagant, miraculous celebration that continues to bring life to us all.

This feast is meant for everyone who feels as empty as those big stone jars in the wedding kitchen, waiting for Jesus to work a miracle. This promise speaks to all people who don't have enough – enough money for rent, or time for family, or attention for loved ones, not enough health to keep going, not enough kindness to warm them up. This miracle speaks to people who are disappointed and disconnected. And it is meant for you.

What is empty in you today, that needs to be filled? You're invited to bring that need before God, and let God replenish you through God's abundant love that will never run out. Let God refresh you through Christ our living Savior, who turned water into wine so the feasting could go on and on.

It's easy to focus on what we don't have. To be driven by fear and scarcity. But a shift happens when we attend to what we do have. God with us every day. God's help in times of trouble. God who keeps on providing, somehow, one day at a time, we don't even know how. We will not smile or dance every day in our life with God, but there will always be a goodness and rightness and a never-ending holy love that can anchor us and keep us going.

When we are out of steam, out of hope, out of faith, out of love... Christ re-fills us. Our courage can be renewed, our trust can be restored. The promise and hope of God can once again sustain us. Because we follow Christ in the way of abundant life, overflowing life – life that is better than just everyday survival because it is life in communion with God.

Today as we are gathered, each on our own screens, still the feast is happening because Christ connects us to each other and connects us to God's eternal, limitless love and grace. The feast is happening even when there is loneliness or uncertainty about what comes next, because Christ holds us in steadfast love. It may be difficult to see sometimes, but the wedding feast at Cana is a sign to point us to see God's work unfolding, not just long ago, but now, with us, for us, through us. Children of God, you are part of that feast. And it is so beautiful. Thanks be to God. Amen.

** The seven signs in John's gospel are: Changing Water Into Wine (John 2:1-11), Healing the Royal Official's Son (John 4:46-54), Healing the paralytic at the pool (John 5:1-18), Feeding over 5,000 with fish and loaves (John 6:1-14), Walking on the water (John 6:15-25), Healing a man born blind (John 9:1-41), Raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-46)*