

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

January 20, 2019

John 2:1-11; 19:16-30

## EXTRAVAGANCE

In recent weeks we have focused on the beginning of Jesus' story in the gospel accounts – first, celebrating his birth, then a story from his youth, and last week, his baptism. Each of the four gospels introduce Jesus' commencement of his public ministry in different fashion. The earliest gospel account, Mark, focuses on how Jesus confronts all that distorts and disfigures human life, so the first narrative of his ministry describes an exorcism of a man dominated by an unclean spirit. Matthew's account is interested in presenting Jesus as the definitive teacher of the will of God, with his first discourse being the 'sermon on the mount' as the inauguration of his public ministry. Luke tends to focus on Jesus' role as a liberator empowered by God's Spirit demonstrating a deep concern for the poor and disenfranchised, as first illustrated in a sermon in his hometown synagogue. I trust they are all accurate depictions of Jesus' ministry, but with so rich a life, they each have to pick some aspects on which to focus. Now when it comes to John's Gospel, this most unique of the four accounts begins its description of Jesus' ministry with an act of extravagance - a miraculous work where Jesus turns a huge amount of water into wine at a wedding. Okay, John, you have our attention, but what is your point? Is Jesus being presented as a magician, as someone who is the life of the party, as someone who saves a family from an embarrassing situation or what?

What do we know about this story of a wedding? We know it was located in Cana, a town just north of Jesus' hometown of Nazareth, but we don't know whose wedding it was. We're told that Jesus, his mother, and his disciples are there, but we don't know why. And for some unknown reason, the wine runs out – was the family poor or ill-prepared for a large crowd? We are not told.

However, John gives us some clues to help us understand why he uses this narrative to build for his readers a first impression of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' mother points out to him the pending social disaster of the shortage of wine at such an event. At

first he tells her it is none of his concern, that the initiation of his public ministry needs to be governed by God's timing. But then seeing the gaze of his mother, he evidently reconsiders and takes action. It's at this point that John includes details that are important for us to understand the significance of the story. He writes, "Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons." Jesus instructed the servants to fill them with water and they were filled to the brim. The jars being made of stone instead of clay ensured the purity of the water for the Jewish ceremonial washing before and after meals. But then, something happens – all this water has turned into wine and there is indication it is very good wine. Six jars, twenty to thirty gallons each – that's 120 to 180 gallons of wine – a huge amount. John, John, John, why this story of extravagance to introduce our Lord's ministry?

Here at a celebration of covenant commitment where two people would be joined together in the context of Jewish practice would emerge something amazing that God was doing. It might help to know that the abundance of wine is one of the consistent images from Hebrew scriptures in communicating the joy of the arrival of God's reign. This story, what is called a first sign in John's Gospel, helps me believe that Jesus cares deeply about both the moments and the milestones in our lives, the details and the days we will never forget. Jesus is not only present, Jesus acts, giving us an indication of what God's grace looks like. Sometimes we may not recognize the source of the unexpected fine wine or the compassionate exchange or the new opportunity or the longed-for reconciliation, but we can believe that Jesus intervenes on our behalf. We see Jesus acting in a life-giving, joy-evoking way. He acts with over-the-top generosity toward us. We may well hoard our forgiveness or scrimp on our sharing with others as we calculate who is worthy of our help, but Jesus does none of that. He pours himself out, he fills our cups to the very brim. This event foreshadows all of the ministry that will soon follow: the ministry of healing, feeding, storm-calming, life-giving, grace upon grace. Here is the first instance for John to help us begin to see Jesus as the giver of extravagant gifts to humanity. It is enough to cause Jesus' followers and the water of Cana to blush with joy. <sup>1</sup>

O.K., we have an extravagant beginning of Jesus' public ministry to indicate that he offers extravagant gifts to us, but why pair this joyful setting with the painful story of the crucifixion? Jesus' mother was at the wedding with Jesus and his disciples at the beginning. At the end she is at the foot of the cross with an unnamed disciple. These are the only two times she is mentioned in John's Gospel. Once again, her gaze is upon her son, but we can only imagine her pain as she looks him while he is being tortured to death. Yet John would have us understand that in that hour the bearer of divine gifts makes his most extravagant offering – the gift of himself for the life of the world. That extravagance flows to those at the foot of the cross, for in the last act of his public ministry, Jesus says to his mother, "Here is your son," directing her to the disciple next to her. Then he says to his disciple, "Here is your mother." John then tells us that "from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."

I've always thought of that as Jesus being a good son to his mother at the end of his life, making sure she would have the care that she needed. These words reflected the formulas used for rites of adoption in the ancient world. Yet as we reflect on this now, at a time when some voices promote family values in the narrowest terms, promoting an understanding where only nuclear families ought to be regarded as real families, this final act of ministry goes well beyond that. Here is a relationship initiated by our Lord that goes beyond the bonds of blood and marriage to embrace others as family. Perhaps those of us who follow Christ are to see that no one in the family of faith is to be outside the family. Part of our work is to weave every believer into bonds of mutual love and care as real as any legal or biological bond recognized by our society. That is not just a taking-care-of-business act of a dying son for his mother, that's an extravagant gift of the Son of God for all humankind.

On this weekend that we celebrate the birthday of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., we remember him and all who have helped us to see that relationships of love and care mustn't be limited only to those just within our nuclear families. For that would be an impoverished way to live.

Just after Jesus spoke to his mother and his disciple from the cross, getting them to adopt one another, John tells us that Jesus called out from the cross in thirst. Then

the gospel account says: “A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished.’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” He had drunk of the cup of suffering to complete the most extravagant expression of God’s love. No longer were the huge jars needed for our purification. This is what God’s grace looks like. Even more grace – the story would continue to help us to know that the gift of God’s extravagant love lives on. This day, I hope and pray we can blush in joy as we see it living on through you and me.

<sup>1</sup> Ideas in this paragraph dependent on Frances Taylor Gench’s chapter “Entrance and Exit Points,” in Encounters With Jesus, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007

