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Year C, 2 Epiphany - John 2:1-11
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Today's gospel reading from John about the wedding in Cana is one of my favorite stories about Jesus. Now, some might suggest that this is because I love a party and a good glass of wine, and they would be correct. It might also be true that the story appeals to me because it was Jesus' mother, Mary, who prompted him to turn water into wine when the wine had run out. He had a moment of reluctance - bordering on some sassy back talk - but the next thing you know, his mother's nudge has not only saved the party, but also inspired the first miracle that her son, the savior of the world, would perform. This speaks to me about the power of a mother's persuasion.

But we must, of course, look deeper than this. The purpose of this miracle and the purpose of all of Jesus's miracles is to point beyond themselves to what is being revealed through them. When we read these accounts, we must ask, *what is this story saying about God?* Understanding the context of this account of the wedding at Cana is helpful. In those days, a bride and groom celebrated their marriage with a seven day feast at the groom's home. Running out of wine would have constituted a crisis of hospitality for the groom and his family. Anyone who has ever planned a wedding knows that this is the stuff that nightmares are made of.

But in this story, there is a happy ending. After his mother's prompting, Jesus summons the servants and commands them to fill six large jugs with water. They did, and then he instructs them to take the jugs to the chief steward. The steward tastes the wine and is astounded. Not only is there plenty of it, but it is good wine – better than had previously been served.

This miracle points to the abundance and the extravagance of God. John's account of the story is sparse, but he is intentional about giving us a few relevant details. There were six jugs, each large enough to hold 20-30 gallons, and each "filled to brim." Rather than exhibiting caution or discretion, Jesus creates at least 120 gallons of wine – enough for even the largest wedding! And it wasn't just any wine. It was fine wine. In this first miracle, the extravagant abundance in both quantity and quality point us not to a raucous party but to the extravagance of our salvation. It reminds us that when it comes to love and grace, God is not rational or cautious. God does not hold back or use discretion. Instead, God gives recklessly and freely and without regard for whether or not it is deserved.

We see also that God rejoices in our extravagance with one another. It is appropriate for us to celebrate and share our abundance with others; in doing so, we model God's radical hospitality and welcome. Jesus attended the wedding at Cana, celebrating the love of two people with his friends and community. And in his miracle there, he didn't just keep the party going. He showed that God has blessed us with joy and rejoices in our love and affection for one another. One of the hardest parts of this ongoing pandemic has been the fact that we can't gather normally in fellowship and, currently, in worship. We have learned how much we need one another, and that makes today's gospel more poignant than ever. A chance to gather for a party seems like a luxury!

While this story does contain the good news of God's unconditional, extravagant love, we must acknowledge that it raises difficult questions. We believe in One who gives abundant life, and yet, we see a world in need. Scholar Carol Lakey Hess points out that this extravagance is complicated when so many in our world live without clean water, let alone fine wine. She says, *"It is passages like this one about divine extravagance that make God's absence in the face of poverty, suffering, and evil stand out. How do we reconcile a story of potent generosity in a world of tremendous need?"*

This is an age-old question of theodicy – of justifying God's goodness in the face of suffering and evil. It seems to me that humans - not God - are often the cause of the scarcity and suffering that others experience. The story of the wedding at Cana reveals that God has given us the abundance we need, but we fail to distribute it equitably. And when one is living without basic necessities such as food or safe shelter, it must be pretty hard to experience the joy of God's extravagance. Perhaps what we can take from this gospel story is the reminder to see one another like those stone jars, filled to the brim with God's grace. Our task is to receive that gift with grateful hearts and then to model that hospitality and generosity to those who need it most, so that all may experience God's extravagant abundance. Amen.