“Abundant Generosity”
John 2:1-11

Have you heard the phrase, “Don’t major in the minors?” It’s a phrase that reminds us that some things in life are important and worth a lot of our time, and other things are less important and need to be prioritized accordingly. But sometimes we get stuck on those small things and spend too much of our emotional and mental and physical energy on them. So we need to be reminded – don’t major in the minors. Keep the main thing the main thing.

The story of the miracle of Cana is a story where it’s really easy to major in the minors, or, to use another saying, to miss the forest for the trees. Because for good upright moral Christians, there are some things that happen in this story that seem a bit perplexing to us.

Like, what do we do with Jesus’ rather rude exchange with his mother? Mary tells her son that they’ve run out of wine, and Jesus abruptly responds with, “Woman, why do you involve me?” Which, to our ears, is a way no child should ever speak to his mother, even if you are the Son of God.

Then there’s the whole business about this miracle involving wine, and not just a bit of wine…but enough wine to get a lot of people pretty drunk. Does this mean Jesus approves of alcohol and drinking and even excessive partying?

If we’re reading the Bible as a book of morality, as a mere guidebook for how Christians ought to live, then this story early on in the Gospel of John is going to leave us a bit stuck.

But – if we can take off the cultural lenses through which we read Scripture and pull back a bit – if we can increase our field of vision to take in more of this story, more of the individual trees that make up this forest - we'll see what's really going on in, what this story is really about.

So we're going to jump around a bit to some of those "trees," some of the points of this story that we might miss in a first reading, and then see if we can pull those points together to understand what this first miracle reveals to us about Jesus.

First, let's look at what comes before this story. Immediately prior to this miracle is the calling of the disciples. Jesus' disciples are with him at this wedding in Cana, and in verse 11 John tells us "What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."

This miracle is, first and foremost, a miracle for the benefit of the disciples. Jesus is in a backroom with only his disciples and some servants when he changes the water into wine. The master of the banquet doesn't know where this amazing wine has come from. It's likely none of the wedding guests cottoned on that anything unusual had happened, other than getting really good wine at the end of the party. So there's an element of hiddenness to this miracle.

Second, let's look at what comes *after* this story. The wedding at Cana is unique to John's gospel, but what comes next is not. All four gospels contain the story of Jesus clearing out the temple courts. But in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that story happens much later in Jesus' ministry, closer to the time of Jesus' death. So why does John put it here, paired, as it were, with this story of a wedding feast?

Well, when Jesus cleanses the temple, he's telling people that some things no longer have a place in the kingdom of God. The temple system had been corrupted into a money-making scheme, a way of exploiting temple-goers and foisting hard rules on them, demanding they do everything "just so" or God wouldn't accept their sacrifice. Jesus comes in and says, "No more. No more do people need to live under this burden, fearful of getting it wrong, and so trapped into doing what greedy religious leaders tell them." The kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace and liberty and justice.

And while Jesus doesn't flip any tables at Cana, his turning water into wine is a similar kind of reversal or upset. This is the third thing I want to draw our attention to – the jars Jesus used.

Verse six tells us that these were stone water jars used for ceremonial washing. Washing your hands before a meal is a good idea, germ-wise. But in Judaism washing also makes someone spiritually pure, and it was especially important for priests to maintain a certain level of purity. Given that these are stone jars, which were much more expensive than the usual clay jars, and which, unlike those clay jars, could be re-used even if they came into contact with something unclean, it's very likely this wedding is taking place in the house of a priest, or at least someone very concerned with purity.

But Jesus takes these jars reserved for ceremonial washing and fills them with wine. And not just a little wine. Even on the low end, if each jar held 20 gallons, that's the equivalent of about 600 bottles of wine today! And even at a Jewish wedding that lasted about a week, that's 100 bottles of wine a day. That's a lot of wine.

So what's happening here? Pastor Chelsey Harmon writes that in this miracle, "Jesus provides an abundance of provision and blessing where there once was law and obligation." Jesus isn't completely condemning or doing away with the old order of things – he doesn't smash the ceremonial jars, after all. But he's saying, "This was what once was, and something new has come. Something better has come."

This is further emphasized by the fact that the wine Jesus makes is *gooood.* "Everyone brings out the choice wine first," says the master of the banquet, "and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

The bridegroom wasn't serving awful wine at the beginning of the feast – he served the best of what he had. But what Jesus offered was even *better.* It was better and it was abundant.

So what is Jesus offering now? What does this abundant, fabulous tasting wine symbolize?

Well for that we look to the very beginning of this story, to the first four words: "on the third day."

We don't know what this "third day" is that John refers to. Between Jesus calling Philip outside of Jerusalem and the wedding in Cana which is in Galilee, Jesus has to travel about 80 miles. Is this the third day since they set out? The third day since they arrived in Galilee? The third day after some other event?

We don't know. John is vague. And maybe intentionally so. Because when we hear "on the third day" we can't help but finish that sentence with the words "Jesus rose from the dead."

Here, at the very beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, we have a foreshadowing of the end. Jesus, the living water, will pour himself out for his people. He will sacrifice himself, and in so doing, will open a new way to the Father.

Where once people had to provide their own sacrifices, his death will be the once-for-all atonement of sin.

Where once people had to purify themselves ritually, in the death of the perfect Son of God, they will now be clothed in his righteousness.

Where once people lived under the burden of the law and the fear of imperfection, Jesus invites them into a wide mercy, into a grace that gives life, that gives freedom.

The seven miracles in John all reveal something about Jesus – John describes these miracles in such a way that they show his readers who Jesus is and what his kingdom is about. Here, right at the beginning, John tells us that Jesus is the giver of grace and blessing, that his kingdom is one of abundance – an abundance of blessing, an abundance of mercy, an abundance of joy, an abundance of love. What was before was good – the law was given by God, after all. But now there's something better.

Malcolm Guite is a poet and theologian, and he describes this miracle this way:

Here's an epiphany to have and hold,
a truth that you can taste upon the tongue,
no distant shrines and canopies of gold
or ladders to clambered rung by rung,
but here and now, amidst your daily living,

where you can taste and touch and feel and see,
the spring of love, the fount of all forgiving,
flows when you need it, rich, abundant, free.

Better than waters of some outer weeping,
that leave you still with all your hidden sin,
here is a vintage richer for the keeping
that works its transformation from within.
'What price?' you ask me, as we raise the glass,
'It cost our Saviour everything he has.'

"Here and now," Guite writes, "amidst your daily living."

This line draws us back to one of our earlier points about this miracle, the fact that it's likely that not many people actually knew about it. They simply received really good wine, not knowing there was anything special about it.

Which begs the question – how much of our own lives are spent unaware of the abundance of God?

C.S. Lewis has a book on miracles, and he notes that what Jesus did at Cana was a speeded-up version of what he does every year in vineyards across the world, where vines soak up water and that water produces grapes and those grapes – which are 82% water – are then turned into wine through the work of labourers' hands. There is no less gift in this than there is in a miraculous conversion. The world we live in is one of abundance and provision and beauty, all given to us by a God whose blessings know no bounds.

So where, in your life, do you experience God's abundant generosity? Where do you taste and touch and feel and see the goodness of God?

In the food on your table?

In the sunshine illuminating bright snow?

In the forgiveness you receive?

In the companionship of a friend after a long day?

In an unexpected gift?

Certainly we experience God's generosity when we come to this table. Here we receive the wine of Christ's blood, the wine of the new covenant, the meal that says that God has done something new and opened up a way where once there was no way. Here we feast, looking back at the wedding feast in Cana, and looking forward to the wedding banquet of the lamb, where a vast table will be set for all God's children.

These are "the gifts of God for the people of God."

May they remind us to look for God's abundant generosity each and every day.

Would you pray with me?

O God, open our eyes that we might see your beauty.
Open our ears that we might hear of your grace.
Open our hands that we might receive your love, and give generously to others.
Open our hearts that we might be assured of the abundance of your mercy.
Thank you for the gift of your Son, and the sacrifice he made for us, that we might have life forevermore.
Amen.