

Isaiah 62:1-5  
Psalm 36:5-10  
1 Corinthians 12:1-11  
John 2:1-11

Epiphany 2C  
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island  
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### New Beginnings

A couple of days ago, when our parish administrator Etienna was creating our bulletins, she got up from her desk and walked into my office. That might not seem extraordinary to you in any way, as the door our offices share is nearly always open. But what you might not know is that there are rare moments when nobody else is around, and while we are completely connected, the silence and opportunity to work on the work that is only our own, is a profound gift. So, when we stand up and walk into each other's space in the midst of that kind of silence, you can be sure something very important is about to be said. This time the profoundly important words came from Etienna's 8-year-old nephew. As she was reading over today's gospel passage, she recalled being at a wedding reception with her nephew, family and friends. At one point toward the end of the reception, he tugged on his mama and said, "Are you going to drink any more wine?" His mother, surprised and taken aback said "I don't know. Why?" He said, "Because I learned in Sunday School that the good wine is served at the beginning and the bad wine is served at the end, so maybe you should stop drinking the wine."

If you've ever been to Cana, you know the first thing you see when the bus rolls into town is a huge sign that says "Fill the jars with water! Cana wedding wine for sale." Apparently, Jesus turned so much water into wine that we can still buy it all these years later! Though there may have been a mix up because I'm quite sure what I purchased was what the steward referred to as the "inferior" wine.

In John's gospel, the wedding at Cana is the first of the signs Jesus made, marking the beginning of his earthly ministry. That is very different from Matthew, Mark or Luke. As we heard last week, in Matthew, Mark & Luke's gospels, Jesus' first public act was to line up with a bunch of sinners, get dunked in the murky waters of the Jordan, and receive John's baptism of repentance. But in John's gospel, Jesus is always in charge, always in control, never at the mercy of anyone, and seemingly more divine than human. So, while turning wine into water seems quite different from receiving the baptism of repentance, there is a very real and important similarity. When Jesus went to that small-town wedding he took his place, just like every other wedding guest, in the midst of the people.

Yes... there was a miracle, and he turned copious amounts of water into wine. But it's also important to notice that what Jesus did in Cana is in some way, just what he did in the Jordan. At the inauguration of his ministry, no matter who tells the story, Jesus takes his place right smack in the middle of God's people and shows himself to be one of us. Yes, I know he made a miracle turning water into wine. But don't miss the fact that Jesus did just exactly what a polite guest at

a first century Palestinian wedding or a dinner party today would do – he brought blessings, and he brought really, really good wine.

This might not seem like the most important part of the story. There are so many other important things to explain. Like the fact of Mary being referred to as “the Mother of Jesus” doesn’t sound very loving. But for a first century Palestinian woman to be referred to as the Mother of anyone, provided the anyone was male, was to receive a title of honor. Or perhaps Jesus sounded rude to you when he called his mother “Woman” instead of mom. But Jesus calling his mother “Woman” was also polite and honorable. Mary appears only twice in John’s gospel, here, and at the foot of the cross. Do you remember what Jesus said to her there? Speaking of the beloved disciple, Jesus said “Woman, here is your son.” It’s the way polite people talked in the first century Mediterranean world. It also helps us to see Jesus not just as Mary’s son but as the Son of God.

Or maybe you want to know why Jesus used the Jewish purification ritual jugs to make water into wine. It wasn’t just because they held 20 or 30 gallons, it was part of what scholars call Messianic replacement and abundance<sup>1</sup>. That refers to Jesus making himself known as the Messiah by replacing certain religious symbols, with the abundance he promises. It’s not that Jesus came to replace Judaism –Jesus was a faithful Jew who came to fulfill the law. But Jesus did and said some very important things in the context of important Jewish places and festivals, all of them showing him to be the long-awaited Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

Water into wine was the first example. Here's another. When Jesus arrived at the Jewish Festival of Booths, the presiding rabbi was concluding an elaborate ritual of pouring water from the pool of Siloam over the altar. As he did that, Jesus cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.”’<sup>3</sup> The rabbi had just poured out the water, praying to the Creator God to provide water for the people, and Jesus answered that prayer<sup>4</sup> by saying that he, himself, was living water. When Jesus made that first sign in Cana, he replaced water from Jewish purification rituals with an abundance of exquisite wine. That replacement was the first of John’s signs that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, sent by the Father to become the WAY to the Father. ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’ Jesus said. ‘No one comes to the Father except through me’. *John 14:6*

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Raymond. *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*. . The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 1966. P 104-105

<sup>2</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*. New York: Doubleday, 1966; p.101-04

<sup>3</sup> John 7:37-38

<sup>4</sup> <https://jewsforjesus.org/publications/issues/issues-v06-n07/sukkot-a-promise-of-living-water/> accessed 1/15/25

There are so many important parts to this story, yet what speaks most strongly to me is the fact that Jesus went to a small-town wedding knowing it was a bad time to reveal himself as the Messiah, and even though that was so, made a miracle that turned what could have been an absolute disaster, into an occasion of blessing and the greatest abundance imaginable.

Wedding feasts in Jesus' time went on for days and days. Everyone in the community was invited and everyone in the community helped to make the celebration happen. While the bride and groom were the hosts, they counted on the guests to bring gifts of wine and food to keep the festivities going on, and that is exactly what happened – or what usually happened. When the wine ran out at this wedding feast, it seems only the stewards and the servants, and of course Jesus' mother, knew. It's important not to miss that, for a couple of reasons. Only the lowly servants got to see this first miracle. It reminds me of the shepherds at Jesus' birth... the lowest of the lowly were the first ones to hear that the Savior had been born. It's our reminder of the upside-down Kingdom of God where the first shall be last, the last shall be first, and God is for everyone.

But there is something more, something we don't necessarily notice because we're not first century Palestinians. You see, if anyone else, let alone everyone else had known the wine had run out, if the celebration had ended too soon because there wasn't enough, people would have seen that as the community's condemnation of the marriage. Yes, the wedding family had some measure of the hosting responsibility, but in the first century Mediterranean world, that didn't mean they provided everything. The community's wholehearted participation was the way the community conferred its blessing. This young couple just beginning their new life together would have been shamed beyond imagining if the food or the wine had run out. It would have been a curse on their life together and they might well have been shunned by the community. So, while the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine is pretty awesome, what matters so much more than that is that in turning all that water into wine, Jesus offered a life of blessing to this blissful newly married couple rather than allow them to be condemned to a life of shame.

While his first response to his mother when she pointed out the absence of wine was to say, "My hour has not yet come," for reasons we can't know, something in him changed. His mother never doubted that would happen – she just told the servants to do whatever he told them to. And when Jesus did change his mind, the rules, the plans, even the timing of the revelation of his divinity all dropped away. Jesus didn't say "I don't want to do this now, I'm not ready to begin the miraculous signs, stop telling me what to do, mom." He said, "My hour has not yet come." But Jesus let that go and made his first miraculous sign, blessing an unnamed newlywed couple from a little town in Galilee with a life of abundance and grace.

The same is true for us, you know. We make plans, we think we know how things should go, and we think we'll feel best if we can control what's going on around us. But this story tells us something different. Jesus, who is always in control in John's gospel, set aside his plans for his perfectly timed revelation. It wasn't what he'd planned – and for a minute there, it seemed he'd

do nothing. But instead, he made water turn to exquisite wine and made a new beginning possible for the wedding couple and their families.

I have a sign on my desk that says “Bless what is.” It’s to remind me that most things are not going to go the way I think they will, and that most all of the time there really is something I can do to bless what is right in front of me, to make a pathway to a future that is sweet and loving and filled with possibility. Sometimes, we need to lay aside our plans, maybe even lay aside our hopes and dreams to make a place for God’s infinitely bigger hopes and dreams. But that’s what it is to be co-creators with God, to be the kingdom builders and kingdom bringers. When we open our minds and our hearts, to be filled with gratitude for our blessings, we can then to go and be a blessing in God’s beloved, broken and beautiful world. Amen