

Signs
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
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Luke 2:1-11

"*They have no wine.*" Mary whispers. If she says it any louder, the guests will hear and head for the door. Maybe it's a little indirect, but her point is clear. She wants Jesus to do something about it. So she nudges him. Truth is; he's been hanging around her house for the last thirty years, knocking together benches and chairs. The sign on the door says 'Joseph & Son Carpentry'. But he's capable of so much more.

Building chairs is a good job for a man, when you're honorable the work is steady. It's a dependable income, one that can support a family. But her son was knelt to by Persian wizards. But it was so long ago. The gifts they brought are nearly forgotten. The gold is long since spent on groceries, the frankincense just a whiff in the walls, the mystic myrrh tucked away on a shelf in the pantry.

Mary can be forgiven if she thinks her son is destined for greater things. So she says again, "*They have no wine. And they have been thirsty since Adam.*"

"*Not yet,*" he says. "*Before I leave, I wanted to finish that last big furniture order...it's not my time.*"

Soused and surly, the wedding guests are starting to head home. What an embarrassment for the family, so sad. Any wine will do, really. The old purveyors line up to supply them rotgut... they smile and rub their hands together, anticipating a big transaction.

Mary ponders... not for this, did the angels sing that starry night. Since the day he leapt in her womb, she has been tasting it. She can taste it now: wedding wine. Bouquet of the cosmos, undertones of Eden, the finish of revolution. She turns to the servants... "*Do what he tells you. Pour out paradise!*"¹

I was at a cute little sandwich shop this summer near Bar Harbor, Maine. It's an adorable place – big, mismatched couches, bright walls, just the right mood lighting. They even had a bulletin board with biographies of each of the servers who worked there, complete with a happy, smiling picture. These bios listed typical things... the last book they read, how many siblings they have, their favorite flavor of ice cream, their hometown, you know, stuff like that. The final line featured this question... Is your glass half empty or half full? That's a good one to ask a restaurant worker. How do you think most of them answered? Half full, of course!

¹ The introduction of this sermon was inspired by the work of Mary Luti.

How do you think you'd answer that question? Let's do an informal poll. Sitting right here and right now... how many of you are half full? And how many of you are half empty? To be perfectly open with you, I tend to be a half-empty kind of gal. It's my default position. I don't know why that is... It's only by the grace of God that I can (sometimes) see the glass as half full.

Of course, there are more answers to this question than just Yes or No. One server wrote on the bottom of his bio... it depends on whether I am drinking or pouring. That's a great perspective! Another wrote... why does it have to be half? Maybe she was a philosophy major.

If we ask Jesus the same question... how would he answer? Before we even venture a guess, let's talk a little bit about the Gospel of John. In this cycle of the Narrative lectionary we will be digging deeper into this enigmatic gospel.

One of the differences between John and the other three gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – is the arc of the story. In the three synoptics (which are called that because they share the "same vision" the first half of the action takes place in Galilee, and the second half happens in Jerusalem.

The Galilee of Jesus' time was not an idyllic place to live. The population consisted mostly of the working poor, many of them Jewish but also a fair number of Greeks and Romans. The area attracted its share of petty criminals; the rules were looser there in the small fishing villages than in the city. Remember - just last week Nathaniel asked "*can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" when he was about to meet Jesus. Everyone knew back then, that all the good Jews lived in cosmopolitan Jerusalem. Of course! That's where the Temple was.

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell the story that Jesus started with people who were poor and destitute and from the boondocks of Galilee, but ended with the wealthy and connected in Jerusalem.

John tells it in a very different way. His Jesus is not content to move in only one direction, but instead makes the trip back and forth multiple times from the Galilee to Jerusalem. The contrast between the city and the country is felt throughout the story. Today we find ourselves at a country wedding in Cana, but next week we will visit the temple where Jesus encounters greed and power and protests the extortion of the poor. Stay tuned!

When you are driving in the car, and you come up upon a red octagon at an intersection, what do you do? (You stop.) If you were to travel to most countries, a red octagon means stop. It's an almost universal sign. But what does a red octagon really have to do with stopping? Nothing!

The Gospel of John is all about recognizing the signs of the kingdom of God through what Jesus does. The events in Cana reveal deep and mysterious truths about how that kingdom is made manifest, even now.

The first sign in Cana is evident in the actions of his mother. Mary, from this first moment and throughout his ministry, puts her absolute **trust** in Jesus. She has no idea how he is going to fix the crisis at the feast, but that doesn't matter. Mary tells the servants to do what he says, because she believes that whatever he does, it's going to work out. In those moments of despair, we too can trust that Jesus is with us, making all things new.

The second sign is the **transformation** of ordinary stuff into something extraordinary – water into wine. In the kingdom of God, Jesus takes our plain, old, ordinary lives and transforms them into something special and precious. Don't ever think that what you have to offer the kingdom of God doesn't matter. Your love, your witness, your advocacy for others, the ways you bring hope is far from ordinary.

The third sign is **abundance**. It's the moment every party host fears... they've run out of refreshments. I've done the math. Each of those 6 jars held between 20-30 gallons of wine. With a conservative estimate that's 120 gallons, which equates to 600 bottles. When was the last time you were at a party like that? (Wait, don't admit it, we can talk about it later). In Jesus, the fear of scarcity – of not being or having enough – is met with abundant grace.

Walter Brueggemann suggests that the entirety of the biblical story is about scarcity and abundance. From the earliest moments, humanity was invited to "be fruitful and multiply". But the fear that there is not enough to go around is a constant motivator that colors how we see the world and ourselves in it.

When we are stuck in that fear, we feel helpless – as if little good can happen. Let's not sink into that trap. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King famously said... *"If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward."*

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away was a small, remote mountain village. All of the people in the village got along very well. There was kindness, love, compassion, and justice.

Every person in the village owned a special bag which was given to them by their parents at the age of 3. Inside this bag were hundreds of warm fuzzies. Warm fuzzies were soft, cuddly, cottony little puffs. When you gave someone a warm fuzzy, they felt warm and fuzzy inside. People in the village gave each other warm fuzzies anytime they wanted to let someone know they were loved.

One day, an evil sorcerer came to town. He saw that everyone was giving out these warm fuzzies from their bags and didn't like it. He went up to one villager and said, *"Why*

do you keep giving away your warm fuzzies? Aren't you afraid you're going to run out? Here, take this bag of cold pricklies and give these to the people in your village instead, and keep all your warm fuzzies for yourself."

The villager took the bag and the next time he ran into a friend, he handed him one of the cold pricklies. A cold prickly sorta looked on the outside like a warm fuzzy, but if you push away the fluff it's sharp and painful. A cold prickly made the person receiving it feel awful, like they were swallowing a pin cushion.

Soon all the villagers went to the sorcerer and asked for their own bag of cold pricklies. They didn't want to be the only people handing out warm fuzzies if everyone else was going to hand out cold pricklies.

The sorcerer was pleased. His plan was working perfectly. The village was in a constant state of low-level fear, anxiety and occasional panic. They were becoming divided. Neighbor turned against neighbor. Everyone started avoiding everyone else so they wouldn't be given a cold prickly. What was worse was the people hoarded their small, personal supply of warm fuzzies and didn't give them out to anyone anymore.

One day the prince of the land visited the small town. Almost immediately someone handed him a cold prickly from their bag. But the prince, recognizing what it was, refused to take it. The villager was surprised and tried again. The prince handed the villager a warm fuzzy from his bag, instead. The villager was surprised, and a little maybe a little ashamed.

The prince, curious about this new behavior in his loyal subject, asked him why he chose to give the cold prickly. The villager responded, *"Why should I give away all of my warm fuzzies? Shouldn't I keep them for myself? After all, I don't want to run out."* All the other villagers around him agreed. They had decided that the sorcerer was onto something and that they needed to guard what little they had left because kindness, love, compassion and justice were indeed in short supply.

But the prince said, *"Don't you see? Every time you give away a warm fuzzy a new one is created in your own bag. The more you give away, the more you will have. Ha, ha – you can never run out!"* The people saw the wisdom of his words and made a decision to send the sorcerer away.

As fairy tales go, it's a sweet one. And, like the Wedding at Cana, it points us to a wider truth. Jesus teaches us that the Kingdom of God is all about trust, transformation and abundance. His glass is never half empty or half full; it's overflowing and spilling down the sides. God's love and grace are deeper and wider than we can ever imagine, and it will never run out. And if we, in turn, choose to act with love and grace, and make the choice to give that good stuff away, it will never, ever end. Amen.