

Epiphany 02 C 2019
January 20, 2019 :: John 2:1-11
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“A New Vision of Grace.”

Grace — as in God’s grace — is one of those words that seems so central to our theological sense as the people of God. But at the same time, it’s a word that can be really hard to define.

Certainly, our *Book of Common Prayer* provides us with a definition, and it’s this:

“Grace is God’s favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills” (p. 858).

And that’s a fine definition, but I tend to be more of a visual person, and so, sometimes, I would like to have an illustration or an example to really help me understand something.

Fortunately, in our gospel reading this morning, we have the very thing that people like me need, in the story of Jesus changing

water into wine. But before I get to that, there's some other ground we need to cover first.

I recently read somewhere that, when it comes to the gospel's description of the public ministry of Jesus, first things matter. That is, the first thing that Jesus does, as an expression of his public ministry, sets the tone for the remainder of his ministry, and may even establish an agenda for what he wants to accomplish and communicate.

For example, in Matthew's gospel, that first thing is Jesus' sermon on the mount, a message of renewal, and hope, and restoration. In Mark's gospel, that first thing is Jesus healing a man with an unclean spirit. And in Luke's gospel, that first thing is Jesus healing a bunch of different people suffering from a bunch of different ailments. And all of those first things sound really important, and significant, and life-changing. But in John's gospel, the first thing that Jesus does is to turn water into wine, so that a wedding banquet can carry on. Maybe it's just me, but that sounds a bit frivolous. But it's really not. So, let's visit that scene again.

Jesus and his disciples are guests at a wedding, when the hosts run out of wine. Now, that doesn't sound like the end of the world, does it? Sure, it might have been embarrassing, and it might have been inconvenient, but was it really something that required the intervention of the Incarnate Word of God?

As it turns out, the answer is "Absolutely yes!" You see, in those days, wine wasn't just a convenient social lubricant, though it was certainly that. But wine was also symbolic of so many important things. It was symbolic of a successful harvest; it was symbolic of God's provision and abundance; and it was symbolic of joy and gladness and hospitality. And so, to run short of wine was to run short of the blessings of God. And that's why running out of wine wasn't just a social *faux pas*, it was a disaster, and a tragedy.

And that's when Jesus steps in, and provides not just more wine, but more wine than that whole crowd could possibly have consumed — and not just over the course of the three or so days of the wedding feast, but probably over the course of several weeks. By one estimate, Jesus provided the equivalent to an additional thousand bottles of wine! And, what's more, it was really great wine!

And that, according to John's gospel, is what God's grace is like. It's an overflowing of joy. It's an over-abundance of blessing. And it's the promise of the presence of God in every aspect of our lives. And, if I'm being honest, I think that's a better description of grace than what I read to you from the Prayer Book.

So, why is all this important? It's because we humans have been hard-wired by evolution to pay attention to scarcity and fear. And messages of scarcity and fear motivate us more than almost anything else you can think of. That's why everyone — from preachers to politicians to marketers — will almost always sprinkle suggestions of scarcity and fear in their messages. Because it works.

Now, that might have been appropriate when humans were still primitive hunter-gatherers, when food was a thing you had to forage for every hour of every day, and when there were lots of animals roaming around who thought that humans made for a tasty treat. But for the vast majority of humans alive today, that's not how the world works. But even more importantly, that's not how the gospel works, because that's now how God works!

Did you know that, in the Bible, the most oft repeated command from God or his angels to humans is “do *not* be afraid.” And their most oft repeated theme is that of abundance, and not scarcity.

But too often, I fear that we preachers and teachers have tried to define the good news of the gospel in ways that are too limited, and often rob the gospel of its joy. To hear some preachers — and I’m including myself as well — it’s like the only reason for the life and ministry of Jesus, was so that God would overlook our misdeeds. Don’t get me wrong, the forgiveness of sins is a central and important element of our faith. But too often we’ll talk about it as if it’s the *only* element of our faith.

And so, that’s why I’m grateful that John’s gospel reminds us — and right at the beginning of his text — that grace isn’t only about making up for something we lack, but also about providing more than we ever imagined, or ever thought we deserved. I mean, if Jesus had simply provided enough decent wine to see the party through to its conclusion, it would have been gratefully received. But Jesus goes way beyond our needs and expectations. And there’s a message in that.

And that message is this: If we allow ourselves to be distracted by the messages of scarcity and fear that seem to come at us from all sides — even from within — there is a real chance that we’re going to miss all the obvious clues that point us to evidence that God’s grace is literally everywhere around us, and at all times.

For example, every day I get to go home and enjoy lunch with my wife. And something we both like to do after lunch, is to put our feet up for a brief “power nap.” However, while we looking forward to having Laura and Max all to ourselves for those ten days, my main fear was that I would experience a scarcity of those post-lunch power naps. And I’m here to tell you that my fears were realized.

But what I didn’t anticipate was that, in all of the busyness that is required in attending to a five month old baby, I kept finding myself surprised by the presence of God’s grace . . . and in places I least expected it.

On the last evening that Laura and Max were with us, I had taken Max to our guest room where we had set up a make-shift changing table, because he needed a clean diaper. Now, days

earlier, Max had learned that he could roll himself over. And so, when I laid him on the changing table, all he wanted to do was to roll over . . . which would have meant his rolling off the table, and down the 32 inches to the floor. So, I had to physically restrain him the entire time. Let me tell you, Max became so upset that I wouldn't let him roll over — but he was probably really tired, too — but he was so upset that his scream developed a little vibrato. And I can still remember working with the wipes and the lotion and the diaper, and looking at him being so clearly upset, and hearing him screaming at the top of his lungs. But at the same time I can remember thinking, “My God, I love this little boy!”

And that's God's grace!

I've long preached and taught that having children taught me about God's love. Well, what I've just realized is that, having grandchildren is now teaching me about God's grace.

And here's the thing: If I could glean an unexpected new insight into God's grace, while changing the diaper of an infant who is throwing a tantrum, just imagine what else we might learn about God's love and God's grace from all of the ordinary situations that are so much less dramatic.

And so, maybe this becomes our “Season of Epiphany Challenge”: to really pay attention to what’s going on around us, and see if we can see more indications of the presence of God’s grace at work in our lives. And thereby see what new things we can learn about God.

Amen.