



Sunday January 16, 2022

Pastor Tony Acompanado

John 2:1-11 (Second Sunday after Epiphany)

I doubt it's the line that I'm supposed to fixate on in today's Gospel, but I can't help myself. I can't help wondering exactly how Mary says it. Quietly, urgently, after pulling her distracted son away from his friends, away from the music and the dancing, away from the servants working diligently to hide their growing panic as countless wedding guests swirl obliviously around them. I imagine that Mary sets things in motion by grabbing the attention of Jesus with a stern stare and then she takes him aside and whispers the shameful news into his ear: "They have no wine."

Now, outside of communion on Sundays I don't really drink wine. On the rare occasion a friend offers it to me then I may accept, but this certainly doesn't make me a wine expert or even an enthusiast. So, when I read this story, my first reaction is, "so the wine ran out...so what!" But before any of you more dedicated wine people get all up in arms over this, bear with me a little, because while this may be my own personal thoughts around the issue at hand, I completely understand that in the context this story takes place – a wedding banquet running out of wine is a definite faux pas...a major disaster...an embarrassment of epic proportions. And knowing this then, makes Mary's response even more significant.

But just to be clear – the wedding in Cana story is not a story about scarcity. Instead, it's a story about abundance – lavish, excessive, and extravagant abundance. As an "epiphany" story revealing God to us in Jesus Christ, when Jesus performs his first miracle and transforms the water into wine, he reveals the generous nature of God. There's an importance of joy, celebration, pleasure, and hospitality that Jesus affirms in transforming water into a hundred and fifty gallons of first-rate wine just to keep a party going, and in doing so he highlights God's endless capacity to transform the ordinary into the blessed, the weaker into the stronger, the incomplete into the whole.

The depth and richness within this story strengthens my faith, and I think all of it is worth further exploration. But as I struggle to make sense of a Bible story about abundance, with the painful reality of global scarcity that surrounds us, what strikes me is the vital role that Mary plays in this story. Her line, "They have no wine," keeps coming back to me over and over again pushing me to reflect on different circumstances, "They have no money." She has no cure." "He has no friends." "I have no strength." Mary's line is a line that I contemplate and pray about daily for myself and for so many others. It's the line I cling to when I feel helpless, when I have nothing worthwhile to offer, when hope seems futile, when God feels a million miles away. It's the line that insists, even in the face of overwhelming odds, on the mysterious power of telling God the truth in prayer.

So, I've been pondering the role that Mary plays in this first miracle of Jesus. It's a strange and provocative role, but the more I sit with it the more I'm grateful for it, because it allows me to find my place in what feels like an otherwise inaccessible story. I have no idea how to turn gallons of water into gallons of wine. But I do know how to say what Mary says because sometimes, it's the only thing I know what to say. "There is need here." "Everything is not okay." "We're in trouble." "They have no wine."

And with this in mind, I think there are some aspects of Mary's response that are particularly worth paying attention to.

First, Mary notices. In the ancient world, wedding feasts lasted for days, and it was the host's sacred responsibility to provide an abundance of food and drink for the duration of the event. To run out of wine early was considered a dishonor and a disgrace – a breach of hospitality that the guests would remember for years. I can easily imagine how the servants of the house must have gone pale with fear because this was the kind of miscalculation that could cost them their jobs – or worse.

We have no idea what Mary's connection is to the bride and groom; all we know is that she is one wedding guest among many. But here's what I love about Mary – even in the midst of celebration and distraction, she notices a need. She sees what's amiss. She perceives the high likelihood of shame and humiliation brewing beneath the surface. And if John's account of this event is trustworthy, then it's worth recognizing that Mary is the one who notices and registers concern before Jesus does.

Next, Mary tells the right person. John's Gospel doesn't include any infancy narratives. No angelic annunciations. No babe in the manger. No prophetic words or meaningful stars. But the Mary that John describes still knows who her son is. She knows what he's capable of, and she trusts that he alone can meet the need that she



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perceives. I love the assurance with which she brings her distress to Jesus. She is as certain of his ability and his generosity as she is of the need itself.

Then, Mary persists. This, for me, is the oddest and yet most encouraging part of the story. I don't know what to make of Jesus's reluctance to help when Mary first approaches him. "What concern is that to you and to me?" he asks her dismissively when he hears about the dwindling supply of wine. "My hour has not yet come."

Of course, Jesus is no fool; he knows that his countdown to his crucifixion will begin as soon as he makes his true identity known. Maybe he's reluctant to start that ominous clock ticking. Maybe he thinks wine-making shouldn't be his first miracle. Maybe he's having fun with his friends and doesn't want to be interrupted. Maybe there's a mysterious timeline he prefers to follow – a timeline known only to him and to God. Whatever the case is, Mary doesn't cave to his reluctance, instead, she continues to press the urgency of need. As if to say, "I don't care about your 'hour' – there's a desperate problem, right here, right now, so change your plans, show some empathy, and help!"

Finally, Mary instills trust, and invites obedience. "Do whatever he tells you," she instructs the servants. I admire the fact that she doesn't wait to hear the specifics of Jesus's plan. She doesn't pretend to know the details. She simply communicates her unwavering trust in the loving and generous character of Jesus and invites the servants to practice the obedience that alone makes faith possible.

And if I'm reading the story correctly, the servants' task isn't easy. There's no running water in the ancient world, and those stone jars are huge. How many trips must they make to the well, how much arm strength will it take to lift them, and how deep must their determination be to follow through with this task? I imagine it's Mary's faith that helps the servants persevere when they feel confused and uncertain. She acts as a catalyst, turning potential into action. She lays the groundwork for Jesus's instructions: "Fill the jars." "Draw some out." "Take it to the chief steward." She cultivates a faith-filled atmosphere that becomes contagious. She instills wonder in those around her and sets the stage for a miracle.

Maybe I'm so drawn to Mary in this week's Gospel because I recognize the difficulty of holding the promise of God's abundance up against the pain of scarcity, loss, and need. Don't get me wrong; I love the miracle itself, and all that it means. But I'm more familiar with water than I am with wine. Many of us are if we're being honest. It doesn't matter what the particulars look like – chronic illness, physical pain, financial trouble, relationship distress, or systemic injustice. Regardless of how we rewrite Mary's line to match our own circumstances, it rings true for all of us, in some form or another. They have no wine.

So, what are we to do? What can our place be in God's miracle of abundance?

Well, maybe we can be a little more like Mary. Maybe we can notice, name, persist, and trust. No matter how overwhelming the scarcity, no matter how impossible the situation, we can elbow our way in, pull Jesus aside, ask sincerely for help, and then ready ourselves for action. We can confront hard truths even when we'd rather be celebrating. We can keep human need squarely before our eyes, even when denial, indifference, or distraction are easier options. And finally, we can invite others to obey the miraculous wine-maker that we have come to know and trust.

Because whenever there is need and Jesus is on the scene, resurrection and abundance are right around the corner. And knowing this makes all the difference. Every moment that we live in Jesus has the capacity to offer us another opportunity to witness the miraculous grace of God. Bread and wine can bear Christ's body and blood. An ordinary hug can convey boundless love and blessing. The smallest donation of food or money can tip the balance between scarcity and abundance. A simple act of kindness can make all the difference in the world. And a smile, shared at just the right time, can shed light into the darkest of places.

"They have no wine." *"Do whatever he tells you."* My friends, we live in the tension between these two lines – so, like Mary, let us boldly live in this reality with confidence in the one whose help we seek. Because he is good. He is generous. He is Love. And in him alone there is an abundant life that awaits each one of us. Thanks be to God. Amen!