

Absurd Abundance
John 2:1-12
January 14, 2024
Pastor Sarah Wiles

John 2:1-12

So, the math in the children's time was correct. If you caught it, Jesus made the equivalent of 908 bottles of wine.

That is a ridiculous amount of wine.

It's an odd way to start, because all of Jesus' other miracles meet real needs—like illness of body or mind or basic hunger or drowning. No one *needs* more wine.

And yet, according to the gospel of John, this is Jesus' first sign. In the gospel of John, they aren't called miracles. They're called signs. Everything Jesus does is intended to show us something, point us toward something. The miracles aren't the point, but what they point toward.

It's like a Stop sign. The red octagon is not the point. The stopping is. Or if someone points up in the sky toward a gorgeous full moon saying, "Look!" they are not asking you to look at their finger, but the moon.

So, the question with John's miracles is always: What does this point toward?

What does it say about Jesus, that the story is told that one of the first things he did was to save a party? What does it mean that he didn't just go out for a few extra cheap boxes of wine, but an outrageous amount of excellent wine?

Wine carries symbolic meaning in the Bible. Chicken soup says get well. Cake says let's celebrate. And wine, in Jewish symbolism, says Rejoice! God is here.

A quick side note I can't resist because I have a deep love for 90's country. (Telling you that feels like a very vulnerable confession.) But there's a song by the one hit wonder T. Graham Brown that riffs on this story. It reflects on it from the point of view of a man who has had difficulty with addiction to alcohol and lost a lot because of it. This is the chorus:

*Tonight, I'm as low as any man can go
I'm down and I can't fall much farther
And once upon a time, you turned the water into wine
An' now, on my knees, I'm turning to You, Father
Could You help me turn the wine back into water?*

I share that to say, if you're in a similar place, you can think of this abundance in another way—running out to get more cake and coming back with a magnificent eight-foot wedding cake fit for a coronation, or enough confetti for New Year's to cover Times Square five times, or enough meals after you have a baby to feed you until the child is 15. Whatever says joy and abundance to you is the point.

Jesus is not content with just a small symbolic smidgen. He makes an outrageous amount of wine for people who've already had plenty to drink. Which seems ridiculous and frivolous.

It's fair to ask if this the right story for 21st century Americans? How can we talk about abundance when there are people who don't have a warm place to lay their head, who will sleep in our Fellowship Hall tonight because they have nowhere else to go? Do we really need this story of excess?

I actually think this is precisely the story we need, because it hints at a difference between excess and abundance. They're different. Abundance leads to life. Excess doesn't.

If this were a story of excess, everyone would have promptly gotten drunk, blacked out, and missed the kingdom entirely. But instead, it says their eyes were opened, and they trusted Jesus. That's the difference between abundance and excess.

Jesus reveals how things really are, and here he shows us real abundance, the abundance of life, is all around us, if only we have eyes to see.

But we tend to miss it. We get distracted because we're told every day, all day long, that if we had just a little bit more, *then* we would have the good life.

Even as we are tempted to consume more and more, we're also tempted to reject the kind of outrageous joy that's offered here.

We are heirs to the mighty protestant work ethic. We are tempted to believe we are what we produce, and we can't quite shake the conviction that we need to earn our keep in life.

But one day in a little village, Jesus saved a party—for no good reason, just for the sake of joy. He showed us the truth about God's abundant life. We cannot buy it. We cannot earn it. It just shows up, like a big bar of excellent chocolate you'd forgotten about that you find tucked away in the very back of the cabinet.

It's a gift, a discovery, that is surprising, and joyful, and outrageous.

Be warned, though, it's not magic. It doesn't protect us from all suffering. This outrageous joy is the first sign. The last sign is Jesus dying on the cross. Reality encompasses both. The cup of joy, the cup of suffering: both are held in the cup of salvation.

Jesus calls us toward life—in all of its heartbreaking, joyful fullness. Wake up! he says. Abundance is all around us, right here in our ordinary, everyday lives, showing up with incredible foretastes of glory divine. May we have eyes to see and hearts to embrace and hands open to receive *that* kind of abundance.

- Sarah W. Wiles, 2024