

Jesus Transforms

The first chapter of the Gospel of John, in verse 16, contains an amazing promise of God: “From his fullness (from Jesus’ fullness) have we all received, grace upon grace.” Let this promise sink in for a minute: “From Jesus’ fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.” As we think about our lives, we can think of times when we have experienced that kind of abundance: fullness of blessings, fullness of faith, fullness of love... However, at other times, it seems more like we’re running on empty. We don’t seem to have enough... enough time, enough money, enough strength, enough health...

Today’s scripture reading is about just such a time. Right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, 3 days after he chose his disciples, Jesus & the disciples were invited to a wedding in a little town called Cana, about 9 miles north of his hometown, Nazareth. The wedding festivities were full of joy & celebration... until the wine ran out. Now in those days, this would have been a major social disgrace, a breach of hospitality, with the wedding feast coming to an abrupt & disastrous end, and everyone forced to go home early. However, Jesus’ mother, Mary, was also at the wedding feast. When she realized what had happened, she looked for Jesus in the crowd, and when she saw him, she went over to talk to him.

Right away, we get a clue about the first of five lessons this story has for us today, for those times when we are running on empty. The first lesson is: to see Jesus’ presence... to see Jesus’ presence. That’s what Mary did. She knew that Jesus was there at the wedding feast, and she went to find him.

When we face difficulty in life, the first and most essential thing we must do is to look for Jesus. We can be sure that Jesus is always with us, that he is always present in the midst of our life. However, there are so many things that may crowd our minds in these rough times: worries, fears, doubts, responsibilities—Jesus can get lost in that crowd... It takes time—and much prayer—to see Jesus’ presence in the midst of our struggles, to look into Jesus’ eyes, and feel his love, his understanding, his grace.

Now back to the story of the wedding at Cana: When Mary found Jesus, she immediately told him the situation, that the wine had run out... And she asked Jesus for help.

That's the second lesson for us today: to ask Jesus for help... to ask Jesus for help. Jesus urged his followers: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." (Matthew 7:7-8) Jesus wants us to ask him for help, and he promises to respond to our requests.

Now, there are two things to note here. First, it is worth taking some time to think about what our specific needs are. At the wedding of Cana, the need was very obvious. But usually in life, it's more complex. For instance, it's not just prayers for healing, it's also prayers for guidance for the doctors, help for family members & friends, encouragement through rough times, assistance with the household chores, ways to reach out to others we encounter...

The second thing to note is that Jesus' answer to our prayers is not always what we expect or what we hope for. How hard it is to trust that God sees the "big picture" and is working in our lives for good, even in the midst of difficult circumstances.

I think of the theme of the Mitford series of books. (Do you know these novels by Jan Karon about the life of an Episcopal priest in a fictional small town in North Carolina? Someone donated the entire series to our church library for anyone to borrow. This Fall, the latest in the series has just been published.) Anyway, the theme of these books is an encouragement to pray "the prayer that never fails." What is that prayer? "Your will be done, O God."

This is important as we ask Jesus' help with our needs.

So what happened next at the wedding of Cana? Jesus directed the servants to fill 6 empty large stone jars with water. These were jars that were used for ritual hand-washing before the feast—and they were huge—each holding 20 or 30 gallons. Think about the work it took for the servants to follow Jesus' directions. Of course, there was no running water. They had to go out to the village well, draw up water, fill their water jar—maybe 5 gallons, carry the heavy weight (something like 40 lbs of water), back to the house, then make another trip to the village well—over & over again—30 times in all, until at last the 6 stone jars were filled to the brim.

And here we have the 3rd lesson from this story: to follow Jesus' direction. In times when we're running on empty, it's not enough to see Jesus' presence, and to ask Jesus' help. We also need to follow Jesus' direction. To me, the empty water jugs are a symbol of how God encourages us to respond. We need to empty our hearts of all that would prevent us from hearing & following Jesus' direction: our willfulness, our busyness, our pride, our self-sufficiency... and instead listen carefully for Jesus' voice, for Jesus' direction. Often, it takes time for Jesus' instruction, Jesus' guidance, to become clear to us. It is worth waiting for. And then, of course, we need to follow his directions. Just like filling those large water jars, trip after trip of difficult work, it often takes patience, hard work, and perseverance to do as Jesus asks.

And the result? At the wedding feast in Cana, the water is transformed to wine. And not just a little wine, but a superabundance of wine... wine overflowing, grace upon grace... something like 180 gallons of wine. Probably 6-10 gallons would have been sufficient for the wedding crowd to feast into the night, but Jesus provided abundantly. And it wasn't just the amount that was amazing—it was the quality—the very best wine!

For us today, there is a 4th lesson here: we need to receive Jesus' gift... receive Jesus' gift. In times of struggle, in times when our focus is caught up in what we lack, Jesus turns our attention to what he gives: "from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace." Jesus offers grace, love, salvation, healing, peace... gifts as abundant as the water-turned-to-wine. Let us look for these bounteous gifts in our daily lives.

So that's the end of the story of the wedding at Cana, right? Well, there's one more detail that's worth noting. The steward of the feast could have kept quiet about the miracle. But instead, he immediately took some wine to the groom, and told him what had happened. And the groom could have kept quiet about the miracle. In fact, he could have hidden the wine to sell later, and assured himself a nice little income for many years to come. But instead, he shared the abundance with his guests, so that everyone rejoiced together, and Jesus glory was made known to all.

And that's the 5th lesson for us. In times of difficulty, we see Jesus' presence, we ask Jesus' help, we follow Jesus' direction, we receive Jesus' gift... and then... then, we share Jesus' abundance. That's God's

plan for the world. When we share what we have been given, then all can rejoice together, all can experience Christ's glory. That leads to a very specific connection with our church's stewardship campaign. This week, we each have the opportunity to think & pray about how we want to give back a portion of the blessings we have received, through our promise of financial support for our church's ministry in 2015. This is one important way that share Jesus' abundance, so that the people of our community and our world can experience Christ's salvation and Christ's glory.

Our financial gifts are very important... however, they are part of a bigger picture of all the ways we share God's abundance with those around us. I think of the story of Paul Smith, a man in his 80's who was born with cerebral palsy... by worldly standards, Paul's life would be measured in poverty and hopelessness, but an inspiring video reveals something far different... Ember Hilbert shared this video with me; I find its message warms my heart, and I hope it will touch your life as well.

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=svzPm8IT36o>]

“From Jesus' fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.” Amen.