

Epiphany 2, Yr C, 011716
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This past Thursday, Jim and I joined other clergy from around the diocese for a 'Clergy Study Day' in Pensacola. Our speaker was Dr. Tom Long, a Professor of Preaching at Emory University's Candler Seminary in Atlanta. His focus was on preaching the Gospel of Luke, because Luke's is the main Gospel we read in Year C of the Lectionary; but, because sections of John's Gospel are inserted into each of the three lectionary years, he also taught us some about John as well. His goal, he said, would be, after a morning of reviewing the main themes of Luke, to look at each Gospel reading between now and Easter Sunday and briefly discuss them in terms of preaching possibilities.

I learned a lot from him. I also was glad to realize that I had once learned a good deal of what he said, and he helped me dredge it up out of the overcrowded file folders crowded into the way-back of my memory! And believe me, you can bet I paid extra attention when he got to today's reading!

The first thing he said about John's story of the wedding in Cana was that, contrary to what the Book of Common Prayer says in the opening of the marriage service, our Lord did NOT '*adorn this manner of life*' (that is, holy matrimony) '*by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee*.' Jesus didn't say anything about weddings. At all. He talked about divorce some, but not weddings.

And, John does not call any of the amazing things that Jesus did 'miracles.' He calls them 'signs.' There is a significant difference between the two for John that we should pay attention to, especially if you are one who has a hard believing in the literal reality of miracles. Miracles, to John, are things that make you go, "Wow!" Signs make you go, "Oh!" This follows from John's emphasis on light - light that overcomes darkness - and on stories about people who are blind regaining their sight. "Oh! I can see!"

Another theme in John is abundance. Although John uses the word 'grace' very sparingly, abundance is what he means when he uses it. Most of the time, we hear grace defined as a free gift, coming from the generosity of God, but making up for

something we lack - like a lack of faith, a lack of the ability to do good, or a lack of something we need. John's use of the word means not just abundance, but unbelievable more-than-you-can-possibly-imagine abundance.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Here's what's happening in today's lesson: Jesus and his disciples, and his mother, are at a wedding in the small town of Cana when the hosts run out of wine. John says 'on the third day' - the third day of what? Wedding celebrations back in the day lasted a number of days, even a week; maybe it was the third day of the celebration. Maybe he meant for us to recall the third day of creation, when plants and fruits were created. Maybe he wanted us to think of The Third Day, which was the resurrection. We can't know for sure.

We do know that running out of wine at the wedding was more than just an inconvenience or a social faux pas. In Jesus' time and place it was a disaster. The wine was a sign of the harvest, a sign of God's abundance, of hospitality, joy and blessing. Running out of wine meant they had run out of blessing, and that would have been a tragedy.

So Jesus, prompted by his mother because she doesn't want to stand by and watch the bride and groom be disgraced, provides more wine. Now, this wasn't just a couple more boxes o' wine or some Boone's Farm from the gas station at the Loop; if you do the math it would have been close to 1,000 bottles of additional wine, and they turn out to be the best wine the guests have had so far! That is what John means by grace: an overflowing abundance of joy, blessings and the presence of God.

In the study of the Gospels, 'first things' matter. Mark portrays Jesus exorcising a demon as the first thing he does. In Luke, the first thing Jesus does is preach a sermon about release and freedom and healing. Both of those things matter because they set the tone and the agenda for each of those books. So it is significant that John describes Jesus as providing more wine - and, therefore, more joy and blessings than this or any couple could possibly imagine or deserve.

I think it's important at any time, but particularly now, to share this message about what grace looks like, because it is SO counter to what our culture dwells on. Just listen to the conversations that take place around you. Just about the only thing we

talk about today is scarcity - we don't have enough money or food or security or privilege or power. That's what the politicians tell us. That's what the news anchors on TV focus on. That's what the 'sound bytes' from people who are stopped on the street to give their opinions about the latest 'wrong' tell us.

I guess our DNA disposes us to pay attention to scarcity and fear. Way back in the day, we lived or died based on having or not having the essentials. But that doesn't mean we need to be defined by it today, especially if we are going to claim faith in God as Christians. In this story, Jesus could have provided just enough wine for the party to continue, and, since the people had already been drinking for a few days, they would have been happy to receive even a screw-top bottle of the stuff.

But Jesus went way, way beyond any expectations. Why? Because that is what grace looks like. Notice, too, that God's grace is to be shared with others. This first sign happens at a wedding, where all the guests will get to experience this grace. All of them will watch as the wine is poured into the glasses that they thought would remain empty. All of them will be able to savor the first sip and say, "Oh!"

God's grace is for all. Grace upon grace is not a concept, but the manifestation of God's love. It's not something to be kept to ourselves, but something we are called to share with the same extravagant generosity to others as God shows to us - to ensure that there is enough - enough respect and dignity, enough food, clean water, health care and housing, enough justice and freedom - for everyone. This, indeed, is what grace looks like!

Jesus turned water into wine.

And it was good.

And there was enough.

Oh!