

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany – January 19, 2025
John 2:1-11, The Wedding at Cana; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
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According to the account in John's Gospel of the life and ministry of Jesus, the transformation of water into wine at the wedding in Cana was the first of Jesus' miracles. John always calls the miracles "signs" because they point to something about Jesus that is more significant than the actual physical miracle. And in this case what is highlighted is abundance, the abundance of grace and gifts from the Lord.

The setting is a wedding, a normal event in human life, one that celebrates human relationships and the promise of new life. Jesus, his mother, and his disciples are guests at this wedding. We are not told why they were invited. Are they neighbors? Are they friends? Are the bride and groom or other family members followers of Jesus? We might imagine how it came to be that Jesus, Mary, and Jesus' disciples were there.

In Jesus' day a wedding celebration lasted for about seven days. It was expected that wine would be served throughout, and the best wine was served first, before the guests were too drunk to notice the quality of the wine. When Mary notices that the wine has run out, she expects Jesus to do something – "his mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'" And Jesus did. He turned the stone jars full of water into what would have been hundreds and hundreds of bottles of wine, the best wine served extravagantly at the end of the wedding feast.

This is clearly a miracle of abundance. It is also a sign and a miracle of promise. Here at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, John foreshadows the promise of the end – nothing less than the resurrection of Jesus. Our lesson begins "On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee." We know that "on the third day" after his crucifixion Jesus was raised from death to new life. And that was the beginning of an age when countless followers of Jesus would pattern their lives after him, filled with the Holy Spirit. We are among those followers. Our lives have been blessed by an abundance of grace and gifts through Jesus Christ, and the best is yet to come.

This first miracle also demonstrates that Jesus is Lord of nature. In the Nicene Creed we affirm that through Christ "all things were made." And we read many gospel accounts that show Jesus' power over the natural world – calming the storm at sea or his many miracles of healing and exorcism, for example. There is a poetic line – often attributed to Alexander Pope – that describes the miracle at Cana in these interesting terms: "The conscious water saw its Master and blushed."

Let's turn to this morning's lesson from the first letter of Paul to the church in Corinth. Keep in mind that he is writing after the resurrection of Christ and after the first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the followers of Jesus. Paul writes about some of the gifts given to the followers of Jesus by the Holy Spirit: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Paul makes two important general statements here: God gives each person his or her specific gifts, and these gifts are meant to be used for the common good.

As Christians we believe that we are “blessed to be a blessing.” Quoting the Old Testament book of Leviticus (19:18), Jesus taught his followers what we call the second Great Commandment: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Of course, we use our gifts and talents for our own welfare and the welfare of our families. We are called to love ourselves in this way. We are also called to love our neighbors as ourselves, to use our God-given gifts and talents to support the well-being of others. To believe that our gifts and talents are given to us by God for the “common good” is radically different from the way the world often views people’s gifts and talents.

I realize that I’m standing here “preaching to the choir.” If the people of St. Columba’s didn’t already know and practice the belief that our gifts have been given to us by God for the common good, we wouldn’t be here worshipping and serving God together in this beautiful place. So much has been and continues to be given and offered here. Prayer, deep faith and love for God, worship. Service of all kinds – parish administration and finances; fundraising; preparations for the Holy Eucharist, care of the altar; participation in worship; building maintenance and care; musical offerings; pastoral care; efforts to assist our neighbors in need. Friendship and help are given freely. We rejoice with one another, and we bear one another’s burdens. We realize that we are here to be a blessing to one another, to people who may find a church home at St. Columba’s in the future, and to others near and far.

I say all this not so that we will become complacent or self-righteous, but because I think it is encouraging to remember why we do what we do here. To be honest, sometimes the day-to-day experience of sharing our gifts can be less than joyful. It helps to see the bigger picture, the “why.” As Paul reminds us, God is the source of our gifts, and our gifts are given for the common good. When we give our time, talent, and treasure to this community (as well as to the other groups we may be part of), we effectively say “yes, this is what I believe.”

These are challenging times for the church locally and in wider contexts, as you know. In order to keep going and growing “for the common good,” we need to continue to give generously and to work cooperatively. Would you think and pray about how you might be called to use your gifts here in the coming year? Perhaps you are doing exactly what is right for you to be doing, and you can commit yourself and your gifts afresh to God’s service. Perhaps you are being called to something new, to exercise gifts that have not yet found expression, to step out boldly into new roles. Would you think and pray about this? More helpers are needed in all the groups that support our common life. How might you offer your gifts to the glory of God and for the common good in this parish?

Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). I believe that the key to our ongoing life is in the words of Mary to the servants at the wedding in Cana, “Do whatever he tells you.” We need to listen to Jesus’ instructions about how to be the church, his body in this place and time. “Do whatever he tells you.” It is, after all, what Jesus wants that is most important.

We have been blessed by God’s grace, and our Lord promises even more abundant grace: water for washing transformed into excellent wine for celebrating, our lives here on earth for new and unending life in him. Strengthened by his promises, may we work with glad hearts in his service here at St. Columba’s Church. Amen.