

January 20, 2013

The Second Sunday after Epiphany

John 2:1-11

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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"From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace." This is from John 1:16. The word "grace" occurs only four times in John's gospel, and each of those four times is located in the prologue (1:1-18). Since John emphasizes grace from the very beginning, it must be important.

From his fullness, from his incarnation, we have all received grace. For John it is no longer necessary to talk about grace past the prologue because once the Word became flesh we now can know grace for ourselves. In the person of Jesus, God's grace becomes more than a theoretical idea, but something that we experience - an experience we have with every aspect of our being. We can know for ourselves what God's grace tastes like, looks like, smells like, sounds like, what grace feels like. Grace is something that is lived.

And so we turn back to the wedding at Cana. Those wedding hosts must have been in a panic (in my house a wine shortage is an emergency) but here they were only three days into a week-long celebration and the wine was already gone. This was not only a social snafu, but a ritualistic disaster. The wine wasn't just a nice festive offering facilitating social exchanges; it was also a sign of the harvest, of God's abundance, of joy, gladness and hospitality. So when they ran short on wine, when it ran out before the wedding was complete, they ran short on blessing for the new family.

So when the six huge jars holding 20 to 30 gallons each were filled with wine, Jesus ensured not only that no one would leave this wedding thirsty, but also that God's abundance and blessing overflowed. In this first public act as the son of God, Jesus shows us what abundant grace is. Grace is in the experience of scarcity, in the face of need for God's blessing, turning water into wine. We can experience it - feel what it is to receive the grace of God. And what does abundant grace taste like? It is like tasting the most amazing wine lingering on your pallet when you were expecting two buck chuck. And what's more, there's so much wine that there is no way that it will run out before the blessings are spoken and the celebration is over. Jesus doesn't go small with this miracle—he makes sure that it is absolutely clear that God's grace will not run out before you have had your fill.

We should also remember that Jesus was not solely responsible for this gift of grace. His mother is the one who sees the need and urges Jesus to respond. His initial response is No—not my problem. But Mary persists and intercedes. Mary saw something in that moment. She has journeyed with her son from infancy into adulthood, and thru his recent baptism. At various points along the way things have been revealed to her about her child to lead her to believe that some sort of miracle was possible from him now. She has been alert, aware of the moments of epiphany. And now in this moment she trusts, she knows that this is the time for another revelation, the time for her son to begin to reveal God's abundant grace to the world.

Mary remains stubborn, insistent even that Jesus respond to the need before him. So many of us have had periods of feeling isolated, depressed or anxious, or hopeless even, and cut-off from God. The despair that can come with a grave illness is real; the hopelessness when faced with financial stress can seem overwhelming. And it is hard to know what to do when you find yourself in that place or when you are close to someone who is there. Mary provides us with a response—intercede, call upon God’s grace. In community we are called to be just as stubborn as Mary in our refusal to allow isolation and hopelessness to have the last word in the lives of those we have been given to love.

God calls us into relationship with one another. Love the Lord, your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. It is a unique relationship that charges us to care for one another, intercede for one another. We know that the best antidote to despair and darkness is exactly what God calls us into—connection and relationship—real relationship which is marked by a determined willingness to love and serve each other. This is so integral for living into our lives as followers of Jesus that I am going to say it again: we engage in real relationship with one another marked by a determined willingness to love and serve each other. It is so core to who we are that it is part of our baptismal vow—will you seek and serve Christ in all persons and love your neighbor as yourself?

In Isaiah today we hear a similar call to intercession as the prophet proclaims that he will not keep silent nor will he rest until vindication shines out like the dawn—he is promising Zion, a people who had once been a sacred place, but who now felt forgotten by God—this prophet is promising them that he will not stop talking until Zion is again filled with the presence God. We too have the words to send up flares and intercede in the darkness for one another through the power of our human relationships—through the creativity and energy that is generated between two people forming a connection, a bond of affection. We can raise a ruckus and draw one another out of the darkness into the light of God’s presence, of God’s grace, into the promise of abundance, and blessing and life.

One of my responsibilities here is to oversee our pastoral care ministries. What I see as I move through our community is pastoral care happening almost all the time. We have Eucharistic visitors and Sunday Callers who connect with our sick and homebound parishioners. And we have Befrienders who are companions, listeners through a particularly different time in life. Befrienders hold those they journey with in prayer and help them to remain connected to this community. And then there are those hundreds of folks who receive the prayer requests sent out via our E-Care ministry. As the e-mail comes across their screen giving thanks for the birth of a new baby, or asking prayers for a cancer diagnosis, a surgery or the death of a loved one, these folks pause in their day to hold these people and their families up in prayer. It is an amazing ministry of intercession—praying on behalf of someone else in this community who has requested our prayers.

But our pastoral care for one another reaches far beyond these formal ministries—there is probably hardly a Sunday when I don’t hear a joke shared between two ushers or around the coffee cart—and that breath is not wasted. It is more than merely biding time—in these exchanges someone’s load is lightened for a moment and a connection is made.

Martin Luther King Jr. reminds us that anybody can serve. "You don't have to have a college degree to serve." King says, "You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

When meals are left on the front porches, flowers are brought to the hospital, hands are held in the waiting rooms, a kind word is put to paper, when clothes are quietly passed on down from one child to another, love is ultimately what we are sharing. These little things, our actions remind one another that there is light in the darkness. We are responding to our own experience of God's grace. These small gestures help us to remind one another that we are of infinite worth because we are God's people. And as God's people who know the abundant grace of God, we respond to the needs of the world with a willingness to love and serve each other. And so the ripples of God's grace move further and further out into our community and those from the very center to the furthest edges are reminded: you are loved, you are loved, you are loved.

Our humor, generosity, sense of nurture and care, our prayers of intercession, these are the gifts we have to offer one another. Do not discount them. They are important relational work—relational with one another and with God. The notes, the visits, the meals, the jokes, the flowers, the conversations, the hugs, any of these can be for someone the presence of God shining through into even the darkest places, the sweet taste of rich wine on parched lips.

This community of God that we are a part of is a living, breathing thing. It is brought more fully to life, becomes more abundant, as we reach out in care and concern for one another. We are sustained as a community each time we gather together to break bread, each time we remember together God's abundant grace in our lives and in the world. But beyond our rituals, beyond the formal gatherings, our community is sustained all the more as we go out and reach out beyond these walls and love and serve each other out in our every day lives.

I invite you if you are comfortable doing so, to close your eyes and imagine tasting the richest most robust wine you have ever had the pleasure of rolling around on your tongue. If alcohol is not your thing, think of chocolate or some other rich divine pleasure. Remember what was like to hold that taste in your mouth, to feel your tongue come alive with the various flavors, the pleasure that was activated in your brain as your whole body responds to this luxurious sensory experience. God's abundant grace can taste like this—thick, rich, deep, varied, strong, sustaining, unforgettable. Now carry the various ways you experience God's grace out into the world and share it. Bring the kingdom of God near for others in your lives—love and serve one another.