

This is a fun story. On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Jesus went. He changed water into wine, lots of wine, way more wine than was needed. This was the first of his signs, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

But of course it's more than just fun. John's trying to tell us something, and that "something" is not that Jesus was a miracle-worker. John disapproves of people who are attracted to Jesus because of what he can do. The transformation of water into wine is a *sign*, an epiphany, if you will, a revelation of something important about Jesus. That "something" seems to have to do with celebration, community, and abundance.

I recently had pointed out to me something I'd never picked up on before. In Deuteronomy, where all the laws are laid out, there are instructions for tithing. Of course in an agrarian society you don't tithe your money; you tithe your produce. So you were supposed to dedicate the first and best of your harvest at the Temple. BUT what if you didn't live close enough to the Temple for that to be realistic? Then you were supposed to "exchange your produce for money, and bind the money in your hand, and spend the money for *whatever your heart desires*; and there you shall eat in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household" (Deuteronomy 14:24–26). That's what Deuteronomy considers to be a tithe: throwing a party.

When the exiles were returning to Jerusalem, intending to rebuild the Temple, it was a pretty forlorn sight, and their progress was uncertain and slow. So without the Temple even really underway, Ezra the scribe decided it was time to

gather the people and re-present them with God's gift of the Torah, which they had been without for many years. He gathered them in the public square of Jerusalem, unrolled the scroll, and began to read. The people wept as they heard the words of the law—perhaps because the elderly had missed those words for so long, perhaps for the young because they had never heard them—but the scribe Nehemiah told them, “Go, eat of the fat, drink of the wine, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” And that's what they did.

It's not strange or new, then, that the sign of God in what Jesus does is the stuff of which parties are made. Specifically, what he does is replenish the supply of *wine*, not wedding cake, not the little pickle rolls with cream cheese, not the molded mints, but the wine. Because wine is a social lubricant, it “makes glad the heart,” it doesn't do anything functional like build muscle or quench thirst—it's just a party food. Obviously it can be abused, but what I'm saying is that wine is served sort of to feed the conversation, not to take care of physical needs. What a host aims for, and what you want when you're throwing a big wedding party, is not so much a long table of people chowing down, but a throng of people conversing with each other, catching up with old friends and getting acquainted with new friends—the multiplication of *social capital*. Serving wine is a strategy for that end.

It has been observed that to run out of wine on such an occasion would be shameful in the culture of Jesus. Shame and honor were critical social metrics in that time and place. If you ran out of wine, it showed either that you shamefully lacked enough friends who were socially obligated to bring wine to your party, or

that your friends had shamed themselves (and you) by not bringing enough wine. So running out of wine is bad for community on two counts: not enough social lubricant *and* an ordeal of shamefulfulness on what should be a joyful day. *That's* what Jesus saves the day from. His "sign" reinforces the human bonding that's going on at the party.

The American author Raymond Carver writes about ordinary people in a post-Christian landscape, people without much who may lose the little they have. But like the book of Esther, his short story "A Small Good Thing" suggests the intrusion of grace without ever mentioning it, or God, by name. In this story a little boy is hit by a car on the morning of his birthday. The effects of the accident are gradual, so the fear and horror for his parents builds slowly as he becomes sluggish, then unconscious, and then, in the hospital, unresponsive. He dies after a couple of days.

Through those few days in the hospital, and upon their return home, the couple is harassed by anonymous phone calls seeming to taunt them about "Scotty," the boy who died. They realize that it's the baker of his birthday cake, which they had forgotten to pick up when he was hit by the car. They storm over to the bakery to confront him, but once they are in his forlorn presence, the mother's rage dwindles into a sense of helplessness. [quoting from Peter Hawkins in *Listening for God*]

Nor is she the only one affected; the news of the child's death, the passion of the mother, the grotesque inappropriateness of his telephoning—all these revelations work on the baker too, who for the first time seems to come out of the prison of himself. Confessing his loneliness and isolation, he begs their forgiveness. The couple at first say nothing in response. Instead they allow the baker to feed them—"Eating is a small, good thing at a time like this"—

and, as the three of them consume his fresh cinnamon rolls and coffee, they permit him to speak. Whereas the story opened with the man's refusal to talk, it concludes in a torrent of his self-revelation. Listening to him and eating his food, they then find themselves talking with the baker until dawn. Misery has brought them to his door "and they did not think of leaving."

In a profound moment of communication, Carver shows how hatred can turn to love, blindness to insight, and alienation into communion.

Perhaps the moment of grace is just a "small good thing," a miracle without God, but there are traces here of communion. The baker feeds the couple with repeated urgings to "take and eat." Former enemies join in table fellowship. "Smell this," the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. "It's a heavy bread, but rich." They smell it and eat it, and it is "like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light."

The "sign" that Jesus does at the wedding at Cana is a sign of abundance, but I don't think it's primarily abundance of food or wealth, important as that is. It's abundance of connection. He preserves and promotes the abundance that comes about when we know and trust others. And that's what happens at the bakery in Raymond Carver's story too: the bread that the baker offers is less a conveyer of nutrition and more a vehicle for correcting an enmity and creating a relationship. The sign of God, if you will, is that we belong to each other.

Connection, I think, is a necessary precondition of material abundance. We know that there's enough in this world for everyone; the problem is distribution. We also know that a small group of people who really want to can create a delicious soup starting with just a stone. So perhaps the invitation to God's abundance in today's scripture is a reminder that we don't know other people's stories, but if we can make the space to listen, we may also unlock the potential for a connection that

will yield the abundance of God's reign.

Let us pray. God of revelation,

You made your son known at a wedding, a public celebration of love. Celebrate love with us by revealing Jesus in our midst. Amen.