

**Prayer of the Day:** We praise and bless you, dear God, for your steadfast love which calls us to this time and place filled with the solace of song and prayer, the light of scripture and the grace of communion. Astound us again, O God, with how abundant life is when we are filled with your Spirit. So fill and transform our hearts and minds that we will go to overflow and give others a taste of your communion in grace, in the name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

*Tasting Grace*

Psalm 36:5-10; John 2:1-12

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Weddings. Fairy tale bliss and perfection. Right? In church, beside the river, at Southern Exposure, at people's homes ... just about anywhere. Except I've never been flown to the Bahamas or Costa Rica as I've heard other ministers have! Surely we remember such goodness, times and places so beautiful we could almost taste God's delicious Spirit of love. Then there are flower girls and ring bearers with their own ideas about how the service should go; wind that makes the unity candle a virtual impossibility; all manner of people – even bride and groom – who forget bits here or there; never yet a ring, but in one a choir was supposed to sing. For some reason the director thought the wedding was Sunday. So they were practicing diligently – not answering phones – as the bride, wiped away tears and started down the aisle. And on our wedding day we walked out of the air-conditioned chapel into a humid Virginia upper 90s heat wave. Did I mention I'd just come from Vermont? Suzanne was glowing beautifully oblivious on the romantic carriage ride from church to reception ... whose seven minutes seemed to me several hours, sun baking my full black tux with vest and tails! Weddings. When I'm counseling couples, somehow I always feel it necessary to stress they rarely go off without a hitch.

Ironically, they're much like the rest of life. And of course, those extraordinary days are only as meaningful as all the other ordinary ones before and after. At weddings all our beauties and idiosyncrasies of life get accentuated. All the shopping and service planning, the decorating, accommodating, and celebrating ... it's all a dry run at the rest of what's coming in life – for the couple, with family or friends, within means and realities that aren't pure perfection.

Jesus' mother told him, "They have no wine." Now the way John tells Jesus' story, there's a lot of symbolism in what he says. More than just some wedding at which Jesus and his disciples tag along, it's Jesus' coming out party. This is the first sign, John says. And at the end of the gospel he explains: There were many other signs ... I've told you these so that you will come to believe Jesus is our savior, and have abundant life in his name. You see, the wedding is a metaphor for all Jesus' ministry to come with people for whom the goodness and abundance of life has run dry. As dry as six huge stone jars used in religious rituals to make people pure perfection before God. They were empty ... like the way life, meaning and religion seemed to the thirsty wedding guests?

Jesus said, "Fill the jars with water." You see, he doesn't create wine out of nothing. There's no miracle without the servants work. When I read this text I wonder: What's it like to be the servants? I mean if *we* turned on garden hose, let alone the kitchen faucet it would take some

time to fill 6 times 25 = 150 gallons of water. Now imagine someone drawing a water bucket from a well. What's it like to be the servants? Friends, I think we have an idea in everything we do each day. The water bucket routines we do again and again. Patient ways we persevere. Attempts to fill past meaningful life, even jars of religion – past places, rituals, beliefs – that now seem empty. Our work, our relationships ... *Don't we know goodness in life takes effort and joy doesn't just happen!* “And they filled the jars up to the brim. ... Then the steward tasted the water that had become wine.” And it's the servants who really understand! And I imagine with all that abundance, they took a sip, too!

They tasted the grace of God.

Now as a substance abuse therapist, he wrote, I've seen many clients use this passage as “proof” that alcohol abuse is OK. I always challenge them to either taken the southern Baptist approach ☺ and view it as non-alcoholic wine. Or ask: why would God want them to partake in something that pushes them farther away from Grace.

And in God's infinite attention to detail, two others this week, at very different points of life experience spontaneously picked up the theme. I hear about grace, he said, but I don't really understand it ... how to live it. And she asked: What is grace? “I've always just thought it was love, love, love.”

Well, yes, I answered, love, love, love ... especially when what we experience – the words spoken to us, things done to us, world around us – seems less than loving and life giving. “How precious, O God, is your steadfast love” ... literally the word means unending, merciful, always wanting to give power to live. Steadfast love; or better: grace ... in which all people find refuge, sanctuary; and feast on abundance as from a fountain of delight.

Now friends, I'll admit when I read this story I wonder: How do we reconcile a God of such generosity and abundance with a world, with dear people I love that still know such need. (262 – quote) How do we read this story through eyes of people for whom wine or other alcohol is far from an elixir of life anymore? Or people for whom any covenant with their beloved, like marriage, has not been delightful, or not even a legal option? And what about people like those in Haiti or so many other places around the world where empty jars and literally drawing water with buckets from wells that may or may not be clean and pure ... is not far from the reality everyday?

What concern is that to you and me? Jesus asks. Of, we don't like his resistance. Just maybe because the way John hears it, in Jesus infinite intimate connection with us, he reflects for us what's too often on our minds and hearts. Indeed, is God concerned? Should we be concerned?

***Jesus said to them, to us, fill the jars with water.*** The good news is that servants like you and me are people most able to appreciate God's miracle of grace. How did Jesus do it? Well, John doesn't go there because he never could explain how it happens in our lives everyday. As far I'm concerned, it's not magic or anything like the movie we saw this weekend: *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*. Where this machine takes in water, changes the molecular structure and spits out any food we want. God's grace is not some divine vending machine.

I've always seen the "water to wine" message, she writes, as a reminder of God's abundant love, and our responsibility to love abundantly also. ... a smile, a hug, some tangible help. There are so many ways to fill another's cup.

Friends, soon we're going to fill this cup. And Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that anything in life can be sacramental, that is so filled with God's grace that it becomes a sign of the fullness of life God intends. Of course, we know that this moment is only as meaningful as the rest of ordinary life before and after that we bring to it. We don't have to be pure and perfect. We just open our places of emptiness and long to let God's love fill us until our hungry hearts are satisfied. In the miracle of grace God makes ordinary life into something of extraordinary love, beauty and such goodness that we glimpse eternity.

Believe these signs, as John says. Even amid all the stuff that does fill us, and whatever parties on Super Bowl Sunday, give our hearts to Jesus, the true source of goodness in life. Then taste right now how God's grace turns the water of our everyday efforts and routines into the joyful wine of eternal life!

We taste grace when we light a candle; or walk the dog after dark and the new-fallen snow sparkles with whatever dim light reflects around us ... something like how we live for Christ. We taste grace when a friend comes in or calls on the phone and says I'm sorry for the way I've been recently. We taste grace when our sixth grade son comes home from school and says he wants to download "We Are the World." Of all the music out there right now, he wants his first ever to be Cyndi Lauper and Lionel Ritchie, Michael Jackson and company crooning from when I was kid? We heard it at school. It's to give relief to Haiti, he explained. We taste grace in a friend with illness, or out of work; or a college student who writes home feeling empty, uncomfortable and confused. And in loving response we share compassionate encouragement from our own times and experiences

Like a wedding feast long ago, we gather all people around this table under the shelter of God's wings. Like weddings we gather in goodness with people we don't always see otherwise. We share a commitment to fill the "rest of daily life" with God's love; especially when our days don't seem so blissful or abundant – which strikes me as much of the time.

This morning, Bobbi has done the work of cutting the bread and filling the cups for us, like the servant filling 25 gallon jars. And as we pass the trays one to another, friends, think about how we fill another's cup. This is the joyful feast of the people of God!! Here, one holy name we bless, and share one holy food, and then to one hope we press with every grace endued.

Thanks be to God. Amen.