

## **“Illuminating Identity: Relational Beings”**

A sermon preached on John 2:1-11 by Emily Hull McGee  
on January 20, 2019 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

### I.

For those of us who are privileged enough to regularly celebrate the weddings of two who join their lives together in love, we know that something always goes wrong at a wedding. Pinterest and the wedding industrial complex would have us believe that one’s perfect wedding is within reach – just pick the right color combination for flowers and dresses, throw in dozens of mason jars and Edison bulbs, and fuel it all with tens of thousands of dollars (yes, you heard that right), and all will be well. But it never works out that way! Some snafu always comes up.

The junior bridesmaid locks her knees and passes out cold during the unity candle. The soloist doesn’t quite make it up to the high G of “The Lord’s Prayer.” Tension between family members is as clear and plain for all to see. The bride gets the giggles and cackles all through the vows. The slender ring slips through the groom’s nervous and sweaty hands, and goes bouncing down off the platform. And at my own – when trying to remember all the details for our too-long ceremony (it’s dangerous when a minister/musician plans her own wedding), I forgot to get the grape juice to serve communion to our wedding party and had to ask them all – including my devoutly Catholic college suitemate – to just *pretend* the wine was there!

### II.

Something always goes wrong at weddings, so we shouldn’t be surprised to read today’s gospel text and find out that *even when Jesus*

*himself* is at the wedding, something still goes wrong! And unlike a flustered bride who forgets to *buy* the wine, at this wedding, the revelers *run out* of wine! For weddings back in the 1st century were week-long affairs, celebrations of covenant that bound couples and families in relationship with one another.

This one in Cana, some ten miles north of Nazareth, was no different. Jesus, his mother – unnamed in the Gospel of John but one we know to be Mary – and his disciples were invited to the festivities, and given Mary’s sensitivity to the crisis of refreshment, we can infer a deeper level of relationship between their family and the special couple. They were probably people of modest means, ones who likely would have saved scrupulously for the celebration, ones who would have been mortified to learn that the wine was gone. For wine, you see, wasn’t just a beverage to liven up a good party. Rather, in ancient Jewish tradition, wine was a sign of joy and gladness, a sign of blessing, a sign of the presence of God. So when the wine ran out, the wondering would surely come: is this a sign that God’s blessing has run out too?

For just this one week in the season of Epiphany, the lectionary jumps from the Gospel of Luke over to the Gospel of John, where we see Jesus performing what would become what the writer says, “the first of his signs” throughout his life. Jesus’s ‘signs’ are significant throughout the fourth , gospel – *signs*, not *miracles*, we should note – that terminology significant because they illustrate or illuminate some aspect of Jesus’s identity.<sup>1</sup> When Jesus fed five thousand, he says, “I am the bread of life.” When Jesus raises

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<sup>1</sup> Davis Hankins, “John 2:1-12,” *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, vol. 1, p45.

Lazarus from the dead, he says, “I am the resurrection and the life.”<sup>2</sup> But unlike the other of Jesus’s signs which seem to have a direct correlation between experience and lesson, this sign makes you wonder what exactly he’s pointing to. Could that opening line about the ‘third day’ be a nod to the resurrection? Could the invitation to fill jars reserved for Jewish purification rituals have something to say about the nature of worship and religious observation? Could Jesus’s reticence to do something about it and Mary’s insistence that he act, tell us something about their relationship, something about how they both understand Jesus’s identity and calling? (For as one author put it, “even the Messiah, it seems, obeys his mama.”<sup>3</sup>) And most of all – what are we to make of all that wine? What does it tell us about God? And what does it tell us about ourselves?

### III.

It may not be a wedding disaster, an identity crisis, or hundreds of gallons of wine in our day and age, but you and I share many of the same themes we hear in today’s text. We understand Jesus’s hesitancy when faced with a moment to act. We get Mary’s persistence in asking Jesus to intervene. We feel the dread of the servants when things don’t go as we’d planned them. We understand the sting of embarrassment that would have come to the couple’s family for this mishap. We can imagine the awe of the disciples who see and believe.

Remembering who and whose we are, as we did last week while remembering Jesus’s baptism and our own, reminds us that before all else,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Wine,” *Searching for Sunday*, p155.

we are beloved, and we belong to God. That identity forms the basis that sets us in relationship to one another — to belong to one another, to share in God’s abundance together, to trust that when we enter into vulnerable, honest relationships with one another, grace upon grace is God’s gift of ours to enjoy, abundance in the full measure of God.

For it is out of those relationships that we discover our own selves, our likes and dislikes, our motivations and behaviors, our deep fears and great hopes for this life. Out of our relationships, we fall in love, we learn to empathize, we are torn apart in grief, we suffer in fear, we are released in joy. And even when things are messy or something inevitably goes wrong, out of our relationships, we catch a glimpse of who God is, and according to the witness of today’s text, God revealed in Jesus is a God of abundance.

The abundance comes when, as Paul says, the body with many members — apostles, prophets, teachers, healers, miracle-workers, interpreters, servants, and yes, even Deacons — works together for still a more excellent way.

The abundance comes when, as Jesus says, even the most ordinary jars and the most basic water can become that which reveals the presence of God and the identity of God’s son.

The abundance comes when, as Dr. King says, the dream is captured in the imagination of us all, when “we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>.

The abundance comes when, as Wendell Berry says, “we pray, not for new earth or heaven, but to be quiet in heart, and in eye, clear. For what we need is here.”<sup>5</sup>

The abundance comes when, as Mary Oliver says, “Accept the miracle. Accept, too, each spoken word spoken with love.”<sup>6</sup>

The abundance comes when we become subject to one another, when we realize the depth of our relationships to one another, deeper than even six jars of the finest wine. And if we have the courage to press past our initial reluctance, the willingness to notice one another, the persistence to put our brothers’ and sisters’ needs before the eyes of our Lord, and the imagination for what God might do, we might just see the glory of the Lord revealed in the most ordinary of ways. Grace upon grace, abundance in full measure.

#### IV.

It seems only appropriate that just as Jesus’s identity is illuminated by his relationships with one another and the abundance that flows from them, that we celebrate God’s call upon these who are saying yes to serve in relationship with God, with one another, and with our church.

Deacons, you are being invited into belong to God and one another, to belong to our church and the world all around us, to belong to God’s abundance. For such a time as this, you have been summoned into servant leadership of God’s church and the world God so fully loves. For such a time as this, we the church are asking you to lead us. Lead us by seeing and serving those who are too easily overlooked; lead us as we heed the call of

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<sup>5</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Wild Geese.”

<sup>6</sup> Mary Oliver, “Logos.”

God into the heart of the city outside our doors; lead us as we experience seismic shifts in culture, place, space, ministry, identity, and vision; lead us as we are ever more fully becoming who God would have us to be. Lead us in word and deed to live as Jesus did — practicing bold love of God and neighbor and boundless compassion for all people, filling the world with grace upon grace. Lead us to be in relationship with one another because you are modeling that for us. Lead us to live in the abundant love, illuminated by the Light of the world, for this particular moment demands nothing less.

When asked in an interview years ago about the art of wine hosting, Madeleine L'Engle spoke of the lavish service it entails, saying this: "The point is to be ready at all times to give and serve what God has given us, to manifest God's glory by reaching out with the ordinary ... to manifest God in your givenness through everyday opportunities. It may be that turning six jars of water into wine will be your given task, but I doubt it. On the other hand, it could mean turning your jar of peanut butter into sandwiches for the homeless, or turning your voice into corporate praise on Sunday morning."<sup>7</sup>

Deacons, sometimes that leadership is as magical as a miracle. Other times it's downright ordinary. But it is always, always infused with God's abundance found in the relationships we share together.

## V.

I shared coffee on Friday with our former pastoral intern, Kaylee Godfrey, who has just returned from a pilgrimage to Egypt with her classmates at Wake Forest School of Divinity. I was so fortunate to take that same trip eleven years ago, and it was delightful to remember along with her

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Robert S. Dannals in his chapter called "Epiphany Series: A Light to Enlighten the Nations," *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series*, p182.

the journey and all its great blessings. As she was recounting her trip, she told me about the Anaphora Retreat Center – an oasis of contemplation and sacred rest for weary travelers, just north of Cairo in the middle of the desert. The Coptic word “anaphora” gives vision to the retreat center of the same name. “Anaphora” means “offering” or “uplifting,” and the Center organizes its life around that very premise: offering to all who stay a space of abundant welcome and love. To their group, Anaphora’s resident leader, Bishop Thomas, said to them: “If you’re walking in the dark, and along the way you met someone and asked them what they needed most, they would probably say “a flashlight.” But that’s not the right answer. Because what they really need is a hand to hold. Be that hand.”<sup>8</sup>

Deacons, be the hand. Brothers and sisters, be the hand. Church, be the hand. For what we need is here. And God’s abundance awaits! Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Story told to me by Kaylee Godfrey regarding her pilgrimage to Egypt. More about the Anaphora Retreat Center can be found on their website here: <https://bishophomas.wordpress.com/about-us/>.