

TWENTY-TWO

Wine

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!

—Psalm 34:8 ESV

EARLY IN HIS MINISTRY, BEFORE CROWDS, RUMORS, AND threats followed him everywhere, Jesus attended a wedding at Cana. It was just the sort of event the man was known to love, packed with eating and drinking, music and laughter, the scent of roasted lamb mingling with the perfume of flower garlands, the sweet taste of pomegranate, raisins, dates, and honey, the roar of animated conversations between family and friends punctuated by the music of bangles clinking around the women’s wrists. In first-century Palestine, even modest weddings were marked by three to four days of feasting. So when the wine ran out, the hosts—probably close relatives of Jesus without much money to spare—faced serious social embarrassment.

Wine in this era was not a luxury. The scarcity of water, and its frequent contamination, made wine a necessity for cooking, nourishment, and hospitality. Along with grain and oil, the presence of wine indicated God’s blessing on a community, while its absence signaled a curse. Wine was a staple, the stuff of life.

Concerned for their hosts, Mary informed Jesus of the situation, apparently expecting her son to do something in response. According to John’s account, Jesus resisted at first, but in an odd exchange that I suspect would make more sense if we had the benefit of observing facial expressions and tone, Jesus changed his mind. (Even the Messiah, it seems, obeys his mama.) He instructed the servants to fill six empty stone pots with water. Used for Jewish purification rituals, each pot held twenty to thirty gallons, and the servants filled them to the brim. When the party-planner drew from the pots to take a sip, he couldn’t believe it. The water had turned to wine! And 150 gallons of it, far more than they would ever need. This, John reports, “was the first of the signs through which [Jesus] revealed his glory” (2:11).

It was a strange way to start a ministry—turning water into wine. And what sort of sign is it anyway, ensuring that a simple wedding feast carry on?

It may be tempting to dismiss the miracle and Cana as a mere magic trick, an example of Jesus flexing his messianic muscles before getting to the real work of restoring sight to the blind and helping the paralyzed off their mats. But this is only because we have such a hard time believing that God cares about our routine realities, that God's glory resides in the stuff of everyday life, just waiting to be seen.

"God works through life, through people, and through physical, tangible and material reality to communicate his healing presence in our lives," explains Robert E. Webber when describing the principle of sacrament. "God does not meet us outside of life in an esoteric manner. Rather, he meets us through life incidents, and particularly through the sacraments of the church. Sacrament, then, is a way of encountering the mystery."⁵⁶

This is the purpose of the sacraments, of the church—to help us see, to point to the bread and wine, the orchids and the food pantries, the post-funeral potlucks and the post-communion dance parties, and say: pay attention, this stuff matters; these things are holy.

"Sacredness requires specificity," says Milton Brasher-Cunningham, a minister and chef. "The grand esoteric themes of theology have their place, but love takes root in those specific moments when we voluntarily and intentionally enter one another's pain."⁵⁷

Or enter one another's joy, one another's family, one another's messes, one another's suppers.

Indeed, the word *sacrament* is derived from a Latin phrase which means "to make holy." When hit with the glint of love's light, even ordinary things become holy. And when received with open hands in the spirit of *eucharisteo*, the signs and wonders of Jesus never cease. The 150-plus gallons of wine at Cana point to a generous God, a God who never runs out of holy things. This is the God who, much to the chagrin of Jonah, saved the rebellious city of Nineveh, the God who turned five loaves of bread and a couple of fish into a lunch to feed five thousand with baskets of leftovers to spare. This God is like a vineyard manager who pays a full day's wage for just one hour of work, or like a shepherd who leaves his

flock in search of a single lamb, or like a father who welcomes his prodigal son home with a robe, a ring, and a feast.

We have the choice, every day, to join in the revelry, to imbibe the sweet wine of undeserved grace, or to pout like Jonah, argue fairness like the vineyard employees, resent our own family like the prodigal's older brother. At its best, the church administers the sacraments by feeding, healing, forgiving, comforting, and welcoming home the people God loves. At its worst, the church withholds the sacraments in an attempt to lock God in a theology, a list of rules, a doctrinal statement, a building.

But our God is in the business of transforming ordinary things into holy things, scraps of food into feasts and empty purification vessels into fountains of fine wine. This God knows his way around the world, so there's no need to fear, no need to withhold, no need to stake a claim. There's always enough—just taste and see. There's always and ever enough.