

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, January 16, 2022

2 Epiphany, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 62:1-5](#)

[1 Corinthians 12:1-11](#)

[John 2:1-11](#)

[Psalm 36:5-10](#)

+++

It's still remembered as one of the greatest TV moments of all time.

It was 2004. Oprah Winfrey had just pulled 11 members of the audience up on stage, announced that each of them had something in common—they all needed a new car. The stage doors opened and out rolled in a shiny new Pontiac G6. Oprah said there were ten more waiting outside, one for each of them. Then Oprah announced that actually, she had one more car left. And staff began handing out a little box to every member of the audience. One of them, Oprah said, had a key inside. There was a drum roll. A moment of anticipation. Then she said to open the boxes.

And if you're more than about 25 years old, and maybe if you're younger, you know just what happened next. Every single box had a key inside. One by one you saw audience members' mouths drop open as they think for a moment they're the only one and then they look around and see what's happening. And Oprah, flitting

around the stage, pointing at people and yelling, “You get a car! *You* get a car! *You* get a car!”

Absolute, unexpected abundance. A gift none of the audience was expecting, and then a gift that seemed to be for someone else, and then all of a sudden it was for them too. Each of them. Without distinction.

It turned out the show had pre-selected its audience members that day using questionnaires like, “How do you get to work?” to try to make it so that everyone there would really benefit from a brand new car. Which was lovely.

Of course there were also some wrinkles. Pontiac had donated each of those 276 cars, which was also lovely, but they didn’t do it just out of the goodness of their hearts. It was a marketing scheme aimed at raising their profile—but in the end it didn’t really work. The G6 got mediocre reviews, there wasn’t much of a boost in sales, and the whole Pontiac brand got shut down just six years later. Even more of a wrinkle was that while the guests got the cars for free, it turned out they owed income tax on them to the tune of about \$6,000 each. Some of them couldn’t afford the tax and had to sell the cars to pay it. They still came out ahead cash-wise, but the optics weren’t great. Which just goes to show that TV is TV, but life is always a little more complicated.

Which to me feels a little like reading the story of the wedding at Cana in the middle of a pandemic. This is one of the iconic stories from the Gospel of John, right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. And it’s a story of abundance, God’s abundance, an acted-out version of the prophetic visions of Isaiah that foretell abundant food and wine without price in the kingdom of God. A story of

unexpected grace and generosity in what had seemed to be a situation of scarcity. Jesus creates something like 120 gallons of wine, which is more than 600 bottles' worth today. And it's good wine, something like Charles Krug at the stage in the evening where the maître-d' would have been expecting to pull out the Charles Shaw. John calls this the first of Jesus' "signs," of which there are seven in John's gospel total, miraculous indications of who Jesus is and what he has come to do, which is to bring about a whole new creation in the new life of God.

It's an incredible gospel passage. And here we are having to read it today in what seem like very un-abundant circumstances, where the very idea of a big wedding feast sounds less like a good idea and more like a superspreader event. Where big gatherings have once again been curtailed by a county health order in the face of skyrocketing COVID-19 numbers, giving many of us emotional flashbacks to spring and summer of 2020. Where more and more of us are with us in spirit across a distance, worshiping online, which is such an incredible blessing to have available, but where we can't see and touch one another in the flesh. Where Jesus may be creating 600 bottles' worth of wine, but we haven't shared in the wine of the eucharist in 22 months and counting. And where our tokens of generosity feel a little restricted. At least we have plenty of disposable masks to give out so people have better protection than cloth. You get a mask! And you get a mask!

But even in the story of the wedding at Cana there are hints that life in God is also more complicated than just a simple feel-good story. One comes in Jesus' words to his mother: "My hour has not yet come." Just like the seven times John refers to "signs," this talk of Jesus' "hour" is another one of those refrains that keeps echoing through John's gospel. "His hour had not yet come," John writes over and over, until finally we get to the week of Passover in Jerusalem and Jesus

announces, “My hour has come”—the hour when he will be glorified by going to the cross. The shadow of the cross looms over this story, even here at the beginning. And then of course there is the wine itself, a symbol of both joy and pain, because the wine with which we celebrate is also the blood of the One who suffers for us.

Here’s a truth: the abundance of God is not an invitation to escape from the suffering of the world but an invitation to move deeper into it.

Tomorrow this country will celebrate a national holiday in honor of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. That’s a worthy commemoration. In our church’s calendar, though, Dr. King is commemorated according to the tradition of other saints and martyrs: not on his birthday, but on April 4, the anniversary of his death in 1968, when an assassin’s bullet struck him down on a hotel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee. He was there in Memphis as part of the Poor People’s Campaign, an initiative that had its beginnings two years earlier when he’d visited a day care in Quitman County, Mississippi, the poorest county in the nation. At lunch he watched as each child was given five crackers and a single slice of apple. He could see the signs of malnutrition on their little bodies.¹

Dr. King realized that the victories that had already been won around ending legal segregation and enabling Black people to vote weren’t enough as long as children in the world’s richest country lacked enough food to eat. So he launched a new initiative that, in his words, went “beyond ... civil rights to ... human rights.” He partnered with white leaders as well as Native American and Hispanic leaders to

¹ Drew Dellinger, “The Last March of Martin Luther King Jr.,” *The Atlantic* (April 4, 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/04/mlk-last-march/555953/>.

develop a nonviolent protest campaign aimed at getting housing, full employment, and a basic income for poor Americans. Four days before he was assassinated he preached at the Episcopal Church's own National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. It was his last Sunday sermon, and he preached about the story of Lazarus and the rich man, who died and went into torment because he ignored his poor neighbor. He said that there's nothing wrong with riches and nothing wrong with being the richest nation in the world—the question is what do we do with the riches?

Dr. King's vision for the Beloved Community came out of his faith in Jesus who changed water into a lavish overabundance of wine; the same Jesus who made a little bread and fish into a feast for thousands in the wilderness. That same Jesus is no stranger to sorrow. He knows what it means to suffer. And out of his own suffering he is there with everyone who suffers. And out of his abundance, which is God's abundance, he is working to feed all God's children in body and in spirit, until no one goes without and everyone is forever at the table.

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, and his disciples believed in him.” May we too be his disciples, and believe, and follow.