

150 Gallons of Grace  
John 2:1-11

In his book, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of "the factory that had a problem of employee theft. Valuable items were being stolen every day. So they hired a security firm to search every employee as he left at the end of the day. Most of the workers willingly went along with emptying their pockets and having their lunch boxes checked. But one man would go through the gate every day at closing time with a wheelbarrow full of trash, and the exasperated security guard would have to spend a half-hour, when everyone else was on the way home, digging through the food wrappers, cigarette butts, and Styrofoam cups to see if anything valuable was being smuggled out. He never found anything. Finally, one day, the guard could no longer stand it. He said to the man, 'Look, I know you're up to something but every day I check every last bit of trash in the wheelbarrow and I never find anything worth stealing. It's driving me crazy. Tell me what you're up to and I promise not to report you.' The man shrugged and said, 'It's simple. I'm stealing wheelbarrows.'" Then Kushner goes on to say that "We totally misunderstand what it means to be alive when we think of our lives as time we can use in search of rewards and pleasure. Frantically and in growing frustration, we search through our days, our years, looking for the reward, for the success that will make our lives worthwhile, like the security guard looking through the trash in the wheelbarrow for something of value and all the while missing the obvious answer. When you have learned how to live, life itself is the reward."

But how can we claim this vision of life being the reward when life's joy has been sucked away from us? Think of the many events in our lives that suck the joy out of our world. The thwarted terrorist attack on Christmas Day has filled our days with news and discussions about what went wrong, who is responsible and why this sort of thing keeps happening in our world. Terror attacks, more plans to increase security, more fear in our hearts in our daily lives. The wine of security has run out of our American life. Instead, we are filled with fears about what could happen to us every time we get on a plane or go about our daily business. What do we do when the wine of joy has run out of our lives? Where do we go to get a refill? Is there anything to be done?

Today's Bible story may give us a clue or two. This is the famous story of Jesus turning water into wine. It is a very popular story in weddings. It is often selected for weddings because it cites that Jesus went to a wedding in Cana of Galilee. But I have to admit that in my ten years of ordained ministry, I am thankful that I have not had to use this story in any of the weddings that I have performed. This story is really not about weddings or whether Jesus affirmed them or not. There is a deeper meaning for us today that was intended by the Gospel writer. At first glance we may think that the story is a miracle story, but that is also missing the point. This story was intended by the author as a sign. A sign has a much deeper meaning than a miracle. A sign points us beyond what we can see with our eyes to the mystery behind the action itself. In fact, according to biblical scholar Raymond Brown, the Gospel of John can be divided into two sections. The first section, (John 1-12), is identified as the book of signs. The second section, (John 13-21), is identified as the book of glory. The first twelve chapters of John describe to us the revelation of God's mystery in Christ and how the presence and love of God in Christ transforms our lives and our world from places of dryness or restrictions to places of love, grace and celebration. The symbolism of this sign makes this message very clear to us.

First, the symbolism of marriage is an important metaphor or image for our relationship with God. Our first scripture reading from Isaiah 62 used the image of a wedding as a way to refer to God's unconditional embrace of Israel. It is a metaphor for the renewal of God's covenant with

the people of Israel. Also, we have the symbolism of the jars of water which is very significant. These jars could hold about 150 gallons of water which was used for the purification rituals of the Jewish faith at that time. When we are told that Jesus turned all that water into wine, we can see that he was renewing the covenant which God had made with the people of Israel. Over the years, some of the religious leadership of Israel focused their energy on the purification rituals of the faith and forgot about practicing the heart of the practice of faith which was to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with their God. The form practices of the faith became the heart. With replacing the water of purification with wine, Jesus was bringing a sign of the renewal for the faith that calls people away from the legalities and rigidities of their religion to move closer to the heart of God where grace and love abound. Jesus who came to bring abundant life to the people, showed the abundance of God's grace through the abundance of the wine that he produced. He did not just turn one jar or two into wine. He provided them with all six jars, about 150 gallons of wine, which is almost seven hundred and sixty bottles of wine for one wedding! Just to give you a quick understanding of how much wine we are talking about, think about our weddings here in the U.S. The average wedding party will serve about forty to fifty bottles of wine for two hundred guests. Even if the wedding in Cana lasted more than three or four days, still, that is a lot of wine. This abundance of wine is meant as symbol to show us the generosity of God's love. It is as if John was saying that Jesus shared 150 gallons of God's grace.

But do we believe that this abundance of God's grace can bring enough life to all areas of our lives where the wine of joy has dried up? Is there enough grace to help us deal with our fear of the terrorists? Is there enough grace to help us deal with the pain of the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti? Is there enough grace to help us deal with the fear or pain of losing a loved one? Is there enough grace to help us deal with the brokenness of our relationships? Is there enough grace to help us enjoy each moment of life? Is there enough grace to help us when the well of our faith seems to run dry?

I believe that the key to allowing this abundance of grace in our lives is our openness to receiving and giving love. This is not always easy. Most of us are often waiting for grace to happen in our lives in big and spectacular ways. Or some of us are convinced that we have to earn everything we get, even God's grace and love. Yet, some of us are waiting for grace to take place very quickly in our lives so that we never have to feel any pain. But the truth of the matter is that grace comes to us often in disguise, much like the wedding at Cana and we have to decode its symbols. I am sure many people at the wedding were unaware of what had taken place. They continued to drink wine and celebrated without realizing that what they were experiencing was nothing less than the presence of God among them.

I would say that it takes a lot of practice and discernment to pay attention to the presence of Grace in our lives. There are certainly moments of clear experiences of God's grace in our lives. These are the high moments of life such as the birth of a child, falling in love, discovering faith, getting a glimpse of the Spirit world, finding a job, and experiencing the support of community. But the majority of our time is when we need to have that discerning spirit to see God's love in our lives in the valleys and desert places of our lives.

In her book, *Grace (Eventually)*, Presbyterian writer Anne Lamott tells the story about her son Sam as an image for grace. "We moved into our current house six years ago when Sam was ten. In the old house, our bedrooms had been very close, but in the new place, we were separated by two rooms, and two short hallways. He started coming into my room in the middle of the night, curling up on my bed with his own blanket. I tried the obvious ways of helping him get his confidence back – a nightlight, bribes, Power Ranger sheets. Nothing worked. Finally,

Sam and I came up with a solution: The first night, he put his sleeping bag and pillow right beside my bed...The second night we moved the sleeping bag three feet away, to the foot of my bed. The next night, he moved three more feet away. On the fourth night, he made it to the door. He slept there two nights before he was able to put his sleeping bag in the hall. I kept the door open. "Are you okay?" I called to him in the dark. "Yeah," he said, in his small but manly voice. The short hallway to the living room took three nights to master...And then, at last, he spent his first night in his spooky new room, bravely on the floor. That's me, trying to make any progress at all with family, in work, relationships, self-image: scootch, scootch, stall; scootch, stall, catastrophic reversal; bog, bog, scootch. I wish grace and healing were more abracadabra kinds of things; also, that delicate silver bells would ring to announce grace's arrival. But no, it's clog, and slog and scootch, on the floor, in silence, in the dark."

May you know that God's grace is all around you and comes to the world to you and through. Wherever the wine of joy has dried up in your life, may you have the ability to open up to the grace of God to refill your cup. Wherever the wine of joy has dried up in our world, may you have the ability to share God's grace with others. The famous theologian Frederick Buechner once wrote, "The grace of God means something like: 'Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are*, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.' "There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can only be yours if you'll reach out and take it." Amen.

#### Resources:

Kushner, Harold. *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*. New York, New York: Summit Books, 1986.

Lamott, Anne. *Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*. New York, New York: Riverhead Books, 2007.