Text: John 2: 1-11

**The Bethel Pulpit**

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 May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

 My family and I were driving back from Florida on January 2 and ran into some bad luck about 50 miles south of Atlanta. It was about 7:00 p.m. and GPS had re-routed us off I-75 because of a major accident. It was raining and nasty out and we were driving through an industrial park in the outskirts of a distant suburb of Atlanta when all the sudden I hit the mother of all potholes. As soon as I hit it, I knew our trip home had just been significantly affected.

 I made it to a gas station in the town we were passing through and when I got out, I learned that the pothole had completely torn, from the middle out, both of the tires on the right side of my van. Beth called AAA, I checked in to a nearby hotel, and my 2 kids plus a friend of my son’s, who had joined us on our trip to Florida, went to find food.

 After checking into the hotel, carrying nearly everything in the van to the hotel that was ½ block away (in the rain), getting food for Beth, carrying that food back to the van that Beth was sitting in waiting for AAA, and slipping on a muddy hill I was trying to climb up while carrying Beth’s dinner, I finally got back in the car with Beth.

 As soon as I sat down Beth said, “Something funny is going on here.” Her tone was very serious – I also noted an incredibly high level of irritation mixed in to that serious tone and that high level of irritation directed squarely – I mean 150% squarely – at me.

 I asked her what she meant by “funny” and she told me that there had been a parade of rough looking people going to and from the dingy little hotel right next door to the gas station.

 I said, “Well, maybe everyone at the hotel is hungry.” That was not the response Beth was hoping for, but before she could chop my head off, we both noticed a guy standing outside of the gas station; he looked at least as rough as the other rough looking people who had been part of the parade. This guy just happened to still be standing around outside of the gas station – standing around and looking at us!

 Finally, he moved; he began walking towards the van – towards us. Beth took a deep breath and said, “O great – what does he want?” I opened the door, got out of the van, and walked towards the man.

 He said he had noticed that we had a flat and asked if we needed any help. I told him that we actually had two flat tires and that we had called AAA, so we did not need any help. He didn’t move. He looked at me, he looked at the van and then he looked over at Beth, who was sitting in the van staring back at us with a look that was some kind of mixture of rage, irritation, fear and wonder. He then looked back at me and I am sure he saw about the same look on me that was on Beth. His face though, simply had this odd look of perplexed concern.

 After a long pause, he leaned towards me as if to hide what he was going to say from Beth who was still looking on in that same way. In just above a whisper he said, “Do you need a little cash – to help you get home?” And when I looked at him, I saw that he was holding a handful of dollar bills that he had carefully pulled out of his pocket so that Beth would not see and embarrass me.

 Humbled by this man’s kindness and generosity, I thanked him and then assured him that we had enough money to get home.

 I thought about that man from Georgia a lot as we drove home the next day; and he came to mind again as I read our Gospel for today – this story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding in a town called Cana.

 At the end of this story we are told that this is Jesus’ first sign. It turns out there are seven of these signs in John’s Gospel – seven miracles that Jesus performs – but instead of calling them miracles, John refers to them as signs. The term calls on us to search for a deeper meaning. John uses the term to suggest that this event – whether turning water into wine, feeding the 5000, walking on water, raising Lazarus or one of the other signs – (that sign/that event) points to something deeper with greater meaning.

 John understands that these events/these occurrences/these miracles are not just things to be marveled at or to wonder about. Instead, at the heart of these signs – in the action that Jesus does, in the help that Jesus offers, in the compassion that Jesus provides, in the understanding that Jesus conveys, in the kindness that Jesus shares – (at the heart of these signs) is a deeper meaning.

 So, as we look at this story of Jesus turning water into wine, John calls it a sign and we are made aware of the need to understand what this unusual act of kindness means, beyond Jesus helping out one particular couple on their wedding day or, as it turns out, on their wedding week.

 Some background information as we dive into this story would probably be helpful. Jesus, his disciples and his mother are at a wedding in a little town called Cana, which is in the region of Galilee. Jewish weddings during the time of Jesus were great celebrations that could last as long as a week. The bridegroom and his family hosted the party and people near and far were invited. The celebrating – the eating, the drinking, the dancing, the music – (all of it) went on and on for days. But at this wedding – this wedding at Cana – at some point before the guests had left and the celebrating was done a problem arose – the wine ran out.

 Mary, Jesus’ Mom, somehow learned of this problem and knew, like anyone else who would have been there, that if the news of “no more wine” got out, the couple would have been terribly embarrassed. Such a situation would have brought them a tremendous amount of shame, so Mary did something about it. She went to her son and said, “They have no wine.”

 In that statement I hear a hint of a question in Mary’s voice. It is a question that might be familiar to some of us – it is a question of scarcity. Will I have enough? Are we running out? Are we rich enough? Are we safe enough? Are we good enough? Will we go over the budget?  Can we put dinner on the table? Can we pay our bills?

This question of scarcity is born out of viewing life and the world around us through the lens of fear. It is question that can haunt individuals, families, churches, communities, states, countries, and our world.

 I say there is a hint of that question in Mary’s statement – “They have no wine” – but clearly Mary is not influenced by it. Instead, there is something else that I hear in Mary’s words – something that does not ignore fear but does not cave to it either. There is hope in Mary’s words – hope that pushes away worry, hope that dispels doubt, hope that rejects fear. Hope that says with Jesus all things are possible.

 So, Jesus enlists the help of the wine stewards and transforms water into wine. And once they were filled all the way to the top, a sample was taken from one of the jars and brought to the chief steward, who tasted it and marveled that this wine was the best of the best.

 John has already told us in the first chapter of his gospel that Jesus embodies God, that Jesus has been with God from the beginning of time, and that Jesus is the Word that became flesh; now, we learn from John’s story about the wedding at Cana, that Jesus provides an abundant outpouring of grace.

 So, the message is not so much the water into wine. The message is grace – abundant, overflowing, premium grace. There is enough grace here for a whole party, for a whole city, a whole community; there is enough grace here for the whole world. From God’s fullness of grace, right up to the brim, we all have received grace upon grace upon grace.

 You may be asking yourself just about now, so why does this story make you think of that guy from Georgia? Well, in a strange way, that guy from Georgia showed me abundant grace in a way that I had not really experienced before. I do not know much about that man, but I know that I received from him, or at least was offered by him compassion, warmth, hospitality, kindness, acceptance, help, and money.

 When I think about that handful of crumpled up dollar bills that he intended to give to me, a couple of things have crossed my mind. I felt really bad – I was ashamed at how quickly I formed a negative opinion about him.

But beyond that, and more to the point… I have marveled at this man’s unwillingness to be moved or controlled by a sense of scarcity. This man did not seem to have a whole lot, yet he offered me this handful of money, which could have been all the money he had. That just seems crazy, yet he did it for me.

 Abundant grace. We have a God who showers us with abundant grace – grace that reveals God’s glory, God’s love, God’s peace; and grace that encourages us to play a role as well.

 So, as we “dig into our pockets,” may we all be motivated, not by fear and scarcity, but by joy and love, to abundantly share a bit of God’s grace with the world.

Amen.