

“Live an Abundant Life”

John 2:1-11

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Living an abundant life is the goal of Christian spirituality. Christians are truly called to pursue the blessing of abundance through Jesus Christ, the source of blessings, overwhelming gratefulness and overflowing joy. In the English dictionary, the word abundance is defined as “overflowing fullness or an extremely plentiful or oversufficient quantity or supply.” I want to make sure that abundance doesn’t merely mean affluence, success, or wealth, but it is a much deeper and profound level of your spiritual wellness, contentment and happiness that will bring you peace to the bottom of your soul. In today’s New Testament story of the wedding feast in Cana, Jesus wants us to know what the abundant life means and encourages us how we can claim the blessing of abundance. Ultimately, Jesus invites us to receive the gift of abundant life. He challenges us to live an abundant life by following him. What is “abundant life” and how do we find it and experience it as ours?

Let us begin with the discussion of the wedding event. The gospel of John records seven miracles and Jesus’ resurrection. The wedding event in Cana is about the first one. When Jesus performed any miraculous action, he always had faithful intention with a clear purpose. What was it? Weddings are exciting life events. It is a full celebration with a new beginning. It is a symbol of happy life as it is. Wedding party should be joyful, wonderful and happy without any interruption. I want to share a funny story with you:

A little girl went to a wedding for the first time. As the bride walked up the aisle she whispered to her mother, “Why is the bride wearing all white?” The mother leaned down and answered, “Because white is the color of happiness, and today is the happiest day of her life.” The child thought about this for awhile then said, “Then why is the groom wearing black?”¹

The wedding event usually involves all family members, relatives, friends and neighbors because it is indeed a party and celebration of life! In Jesus’ time, Jewish weddings were also festive events and grand parties that lasted for seven days. It usually began on Tuesday nights and the groom and his friends would

¹ An excerpt from Rev. Linda Loessberg-Zahl’s sermon, “*What Are You Wearing to the Wedding?*” (Oct. 12, 2018)

go over to the bride's house at night. During those seven days, family and friends would bring their gifts, their hot dishes, and their good humor. At such wedding celebrations as these, wine was served. Wine was and is part of Jewish families' daily life, especially for the wedding banquet. In Jewish culture, wine represents life and abundance. Especially for this week-long celebration of marriage, wine was essential. For the newlyweds, wine is symbolized as the life of party and the expectation of a good life to come. Therefore no wedding would be complete without wine. Traditionally the groom was responsible for providing adequate supplies. If something ran out before the party was over, for example, to run out of wine, it was regarded as a big mistake and public embarrassment for the groom and his family.²

Please notice that the Bible records the failure experience in this story. In the middle of the party, despite the thorough preparation of the wedding supplies, people realized that "they had no more wine." "No wine" means that the party could come to an end. It is a critical mistake and crisis moment. People were in a panic. They didn't want to end the special party, but they had no idea what to do. What does this situation imply to us? It is an experience of failure! I wish that the Bible could record all successful and glorious events only, but it includes our failure experience as well. This honestly represents our life stories. None of us desires to experience failure or crisis, but somehow we inevitably should go through these challenges as Jesus' disciples went through. What did they learn from the failure and crisis?

Abundance in life is the ultimate value and promise that Jesus wants to give to us, but it doesn't mean a magical gift of happiness and absolute miracle of joy without any life challenges. Rather it is something that we can find when we go through and face life challenges as we trust in Jesus. For example, how do we find joy in the midst of hardship, a new possibility in the middle of despair, comfort in the midst of sorrow, love in the midst of hatred a way forward in hope when hope seems to be illusive. How can we find "abundant life" in the midst of failures, a list of failures and challenges?

In our Scripture story, when Jesus' disciples and guests were to deal with a crisis moment, they called on to Jesus and they gave their full trust in him. The lesson was simple and clear: "No more wine, call on to Jesus!" When people and even the groom's family were embarrassed what to do, they invited Jesus for grace and mercy. So what happened? Jesus asked people to bring six stoneware water pots and fill them with water. When the servants filled water to the brim and took them to the host, they were surprised to see that water had become

² An excerpt from internet pastoral resource, "*No More Wine? Invite Jesus!*" (Mt. Salem UMC)

wine. What is the message imply in this act of changing water into wine? The message is not in the miraculous material transformation from water into wine. Jesus took six stone water jars which can hold twenty or thirty gallons of water and he transformed them. How much wine did Jesus produce to continue the party, especially for the bride and groom's family. It was approximately 120-180 gallons of wine, and people tasted "the best wine". We can easily imagine how people reacted to more wines, even the better ones. The point of this sign is "abundance." Jesus brought "abundance" and "joy" when people were in need and in despair. Jesus transformed their need and despair into abundance and joy. Please do not misunderstand me. I do not mean to guarantee you that if you trust in Jesus, Jesus can make you a rich person or he can transform your circumstances into a better environment. This is not the point of the abundant life. Abundant life is not in the change of materials or our circumstances. Rather it is in the change of our life attitude. God didn't send His only son to transform our circumstances but to change us. In order to bring abundance to us, we ask God to change our circumstances, but God desires to change our minds using our circumstances.

Last Monday, January 16th was Martin Luther King Jr. Day. When I think of him, I believe that he knew what abundance in life means and he lived an abundant life, because he trusted in Jesus. Even though his life was in peril and hope seemed to be illusive, he stood firmly in his Christian faith. Let us remember Martin Luther King's prophetic heart, fiery passion and fearless attitude. I want to share his powerful message that he shared and dreamed for people the night before he was assassinated in Memphis. He had confidence of abundant life in God and bravely said to his people as follows:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!³

³ An excerpt from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speech, "I Have been to the Mountaintop" (delivered 3 April 1968, Mason Temple, Memphis, Tennessee. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm> Accessed Jan. 20th 2017

The purpose of Jesus' ministry was to spread God's abundance. But the abundant life does not merely mean the materialistic blessings for more income, rather it means God's full presence in you and with you so that you feel no fear, no anxiety at any circumstances because you believe that the presence of God is your strength. Abundance truly means your experience of God's grace in you! God's grace is always open, free and more than enough to serve everyone. Jesus simply asks us to bring our own jars of our lives before him. When we follow him and lay these down, he will trade our sorrow, shame, pain and sickness for joy.

John Wesley (June 17, 1703-March 2, 1791), the founder of Methodism in the 18th century England reminds us of God's abundance in us.. In one of his sermons, "The Character of a Methodist", he writes:

Who is a Methodist, according to your own account?" I answer: A Methodist (Christian) is one who "loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength. **God is the joy of his heart**, and the desire of his soul; which is constantly crying out, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee! My God and my all! Thou art the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever!"

He is therefore happy in God, yea, always happy, as having in him "a well of water springing up into everlasting life," and overflowing his soul with peace and joy. "Perfect love" having now "cast out fear," he "rejoices evermore." He "rejoices in the Lord always..."⁴

Over a hundred gallons of wine is more than enough to enjoy the party for seven days and more. The wedding banquet is a symbol of our individual life. We hope that our life is always an exciting, and fun time, but we know that we may encounter the unexpected challenges, barriers or difficulties in our journey. Our story in the Gospel of John invites us to welcome Jesus Christ and rely on him. Jesus is the source of God's grace and abundance. We are called to pursue and share God's abundance with those who are thirsty, hungry and seeking God and invite them to join us. Jesus expresses God's wish and purpose for our life journey. No more wine in your life, invite Jesus and let us live an abundant life together. Amen.

⁴ John Wesley's sermon, "The Character of a Methodist" from the Thomas Jackson edition of *The Works of John Wesley*, 1872. <http://www.umcmission.org/Find-Resources/John-Wesley-Sermons/The-Wesleys-and-Their-Times/The-Character-of-a-Methodist> Accessed Jan. 20 2017