If you remember the movie *The Wizard of Oz,*you probably remember at the beginning how the main character Dorothy Gale was feeling down and misunderstood by her family. Her dog Toto was taken away by the nasty lady Miss Gulch to be euthanized because he had chased her cats. Toto escaped from Miss Gulch’s bicycle basket and made it back to Dorothy, but since her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry didn’t stop Miss Gulch from taking Toto the first time, Dorothy decided to run away. While talking to the traveling Professor Marvel, Dorothy noticed the wind picking up. A tornado was on the way. Dorothy made it back to her room just in time to get hit on the head, and then the tornado appeared to take the house on a wild ride to the land of Oz.

During the whole time Dorothy is in Oz, what did she want to do?[[1]](#footnote-2) She wanted to go home. By the end of the movie, what do we realize?1 She always was home—she had never left; it was all a dream. That was a **reversal** of what we, the viewers, thought was happening. We thought the fantastical land where she found herself and her new friends, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Lion, were real, at least real in the story. We were surprised to find out that Dorothy never left her home, and Dorothy was surprised herself to find that she didn’t want to run away and that everything she wanted was in her home. The outcome reversed what we thought was really happening and what was really important.

God has always been showing humanity that what we think is important might not be what’s really essential, and that his way of moving in the world is very different from what we might expect. One example of this was the way Jesus was born to poor parents rather than to wealthy royalty[[2]](#footnote-3). Another example is found in John’s gospel which tells the story of Jesus’s first sign or miracle at the wedding in Cana.

**John 2:1-11(ESV)**

***2****On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.****2****Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples.****3****When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.”****4****And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.”****5****His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”*

***6****Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.****7****Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim.****8****And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it.****9****When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom****10****and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.”****11****This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.*

**What can we learn from this passage?**

**Let’s see how this story fits with Epiphany in the church calendar.**An “epiphany” is a unique insight. It might be helpful for us to read this familiar story with the understanding that this miracle or sign is revealing something unique about Jesus or the way God works in our world. What deeper truth does this familiar story show us?

By considering the themes in the passage, we can look at this familiar story in a new light—an epiphany:

**The theme of hospitality:**The wedding was taking place in Cana of Galilee, which was a poor area. Hospitality, though, was of the utmost importance in the culture, and the wedding hosts would have been shamed for not supplying enough wine. However, it was also customary for guests to bring drinks and food to help out. We could speculate that the community wasn’t doing its fair share to support the festivities. Or perhaps the ex-fishermen that accompanied Jesus to the wedding drank more than their share of the wine, but we don’t have the backstory. What we know for certain is that the wine ran out.

The good wine provided by Jesus allowed those at the wedding to experience God’s abundance of hospitality. They literally tasted it, comparing it to the wine they had tasted first. Jesus’ first miracle was to create a place of belonging and hospitality that was outside the humanmade constructs of culture. Culture (i.e., what was expected at weddings during that time) had failed; Jesus provided even better hospitality than what was expected. And we can be generous today because Jesus works through us by the Holy Spirit. Is there water in your life where you want first-class wine? The same Jesus who transformed water into premium wine can take that inferior situation in your life and make it as memorable as the wine at the wedding celebration in Cana.

**A second theme is abundant grace:**Jesus’ actions show us what grace looks like. Not only was he God incarnate, but he was also grace incarnate. His miracles, or signs, were not just to benefit the people immediately involved but rather to show the lavish kindness God bestows on all his creation. One scholar (Karoline Lewis) suggests that “once the Word becomes flesh, the rest of the Gospel shows you what grace tastes like, looks like, sounds like, and feels like”.

The six water pots were estimated to be 20-30 gallons each, filled with water that was changed into the best wine. (If you ever visit the Mark Centre in Abbotsford, you will large pots outside that are meant to be a replica of the pots at the wedding feast in Cana.) Because weddings during that time could last as long as a week, the best wine was served early on, and then when the guests were less observant (and maybe tipsy), the cheaper wine was introduced. Not so in this case. Isn’t that how abundant grace works? You might be expecting something, maybe trying not to get your hopes up when something much better comes your way. That’s an experience of Jesus’ abundant grace, an experience of God’s lavish gift-giving, that we can easily rationalize away if we’re not observant. Jesus is the epitome of grace. We can fall flat in our efforts to emulate his grace but He can work through us so we can be emissaries of his grace to those around us.

* Notice that wine is a symbol of restoration

**Joel 3:18 (ESV)**

***18****“And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the streambeds of Judah shall flow with water; and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the Lord and water the Valley of Shittim.*

**Amos 9:11-15 (ESV)**

***11****“In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old,* ***12****that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,” declares the Lord who does this.* ***13****“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.* ***14****I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.* ***15****I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them,” says the Lord your God.*

In Isaiah 55:1-3, the prophet talks about enjoying “wine and milk without money and without price.” Wine symbolizes how God will make things more than right—he restores his kingdom (i.e., his way of working in the world) and our status in it, no longer subject to cultural constraints and comparisons.

#  Isaiah 55:1-3 (ESV)

**55**“*Come, everyone who thirsts*, *come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.* ***2****Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.* ***3****Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.*

In these verses we again see the power of Jesus in our lives. We feel poor and destitute in our spiritual lives, yet he says to us that we don’t have to worry about the price or money for what is really important. After all the richest billionaires on this planet are paupers compared to him. He knows that we seduced by the siren songs our society that entice us to get more, have a bigger home, a premium car, a vacation in some luxurious resort. Jesus calls us in our desperate thirst and poverty. He promises us that he will feed us what is good and rich. If we lean into him, we will live and really live. He will satisfy the aching in our soul.

**The third theme is subverted cultural norms.**Jesus often pointed out the exclusionary nature of Jewish culture with its ideas about holiness and purity. There are plenty of stories about who was considered “outside”.

* Jesus freely engaged people who were considered despicable outsiders in their culture

**John 4:4-9 (ESV)**

***4****And he had to pass through Samaria.****5****So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph.****6****Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.* ***7****A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”****8****(For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.)****9****The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)*

Do you identify with the woman at the well? Do you have feelings of unworthiness? Jesus knew her situation perfectly. He pointed out that the man she was living with was not her husband and that she had five husbands before him. He knew her tawdry past and present situation. Yet he chose her to reach the people of Samaria with the gospel. Do we recognize that this same Jesus knows our sinful past and present, yet he loves us just like the Samaritan woman at the well? And he is able to use us for his kingdom purposes just like the Samaritan woman.

### Jesus extended grace rather than condemnation to someone involved in sexual sin.

### John 7:53-8:11 (ESV)

***53****They went each to his own house,****8 1****but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.****2****Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them.****3****The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and placing her in the midst****4****they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.****5****Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say****?” 6****This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.****7****And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”****8****And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground.****9****But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.****10****Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”****11****She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”*

Is there some sin in your past or present? The words that Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery show a graceful God who knows our proclivity to sin but also says to us, “Others may condemn you, but I don’t. Please accept my offer of forgiveness and with my help you will go and sin no more.”

* Jesus embraced children in a culture that marginalized them

**Matthew 19:13-14 (ESV)**

***13****Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people,****14****but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.”*

* Jesus delivered people tortured by demon possession rather than shunning them

# Matthew 8:28-34 (ESV)

***28****And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessedmen met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way.****29****And behold, they cried out, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?”****30****Now a herd of many pigs was feeding at some distance from them.****31****And the demons begged him, saying, “If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of pigs.”****32****And he said to them, “Go.” So they came out and went into the pigs, and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and drowned in the waters.****33****The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, especially what had happened to the demon-possessed men.****34****And behold, all the city came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their region.*

* Jesus mixed with people considered to be the outsiders of society

Jesus chose to spend time with marginalized people to the point that he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard

# Luke 7:34-35 (ESV)

***34****The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’****35****Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”*

If Jesus wanted his first sign noticed, he could have presented the wine to the hosts, or at least to the bride and groom, and explained what he did and why. Instead, the story shows us that the “insiders,” the ones in on the surprise, were the servants who filled the water pots. It was those people who were often invisible in Jewish culture who had the first glimpse of who Jesus was. The invisible or marginalized people got to see God at work in the world first, much the same way a woman (Mary) saw the resurrected Jesus first[[3]](#footnote-4). In that society women were considered unreliable witnesses yet the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus were women. This fact refutes those who would assert that the gospels were not authentic but mere fabrications written by distraught followers of Jesus. If someone were trying to fabricate a story about the resurrection of Jesus, they would not have posited that women were the first witnesses.

If we read the Bible closely, we will notice that God’s way of moving in the world disregards class or social structure or “that’s the way things are always done around here.” Instead, we are encouraged to invite those to dinner who cannot return the favor. We see Jesus drive home this point in his parable of the great banquet.

**Luke 14:12-14 (ESV)**

***12****He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brother or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid.****13****But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,****14****and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”*

* and James, the brother of Jesus told us that we should not discriminate against the poor by favoring the rich:

**James 2:2-4 (ESV)**

***2****For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in,****3****and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,”****4****have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?*

Most cultural norms are constructed in a way that excludes and diminishes some people; God’s way throws open the door to welcome all as beloved children, even giving special honor to those most often forgotten.

We have seen that Jesus shows that God is the great reverser. He is more than willing to disrupt society’s norms that run contrary to his abundant grace and love for all peoples. But what do we do with this knowledge? Do we simply nod in agreement and continue on our merry way unchanged by this knowledge? No, definitely not! Consider these action items.

* **Watch for experiences of God’s abundant grace and hospitality in your life.**It’s easy to overlook the minor blessings that come our way. You know what I’m talking about: the stranger who opens the door for you when your hands are full, the close parking spot when you are in a hurry, the driver on the freeway who changes to the express lane so you can merge safely. These could be just coincidences, but it’s also possible a loving God used “coincidence” to shower you with an instance of loving grace.
* **Weigh your own tendencies to exclude those different from you and to favor those that culture deems worthy of acceptance.**It’s human nature to gravitate toward those who look or think similarly. And it’s easy to think highly of those that culture has esteemed worthy of our attention, whether it’s because of ethnicity, social status, or gender. God’s way, however, calls on us to expand our vision for who is our neighbor. Notice Jesus’ teachings through the apostle Paul.

# Galatians 3:28 (ESV)

***28****There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slavenor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

How about you and me? We are called on to reverse the cultural norms that exclude and embrace God’s way of loving acceptance.

* **When you have the opportunity, lift up those who are invisible.**Giving opportunities to those who are overlooked or forgotten offers you a chance to participate with God in reversing the negative effects of discriminatory social constructs.

We can casually read the story of Jesus’ first sign correctly regard it as a miracle and as the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. But we can also see the water turned into wine as indicative of Jesus’ mission itself: to reveal who God is, to reveal God’s great abundant love and grace for all, to establish God’s commitment to restore us as his beloved people, and to begin the great reversal. He shows us that the cultural expectations about who is worthy and who is not, or who gets to participate, or who is loved and blessed is different than what we might think. Just as Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*realized that her perceptions of life and home were incorrect, we can understand the limitations we often place on God’s willingness to love us, as well as the limitations we put on our love for others.

**Bottom Line**:

Do you want to make Jesus visible in 2022? Then reach out to the invisible all around you.

Word count: 3515

Estimated time: 26 minutes

1. Wait for a response. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Luke 2:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. (John 20:11-18) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)