

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Rev. Claire George-Drumheller
John 2:1-11
Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 20, 2019

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

John 2:1-11 (NRSV)

My spouse, Matt, and I moved to Albemarle, NC, in 2012. We had just graduated from seminary, we were newly married (only a few months at that point), and Matt had accepted a call to serve at the Presbyterian church in town.

We pulled into the driveway of our new rental home in Albemarle with a loaded UHAUL truck, and we were greeted by twenty new parishioners, all in work clothes with sleeves rolled up, ready to help us call this new house "home." We eagerly met each person, overwhelmed with names and family connections, but were grateful for the welcome wagon. The church's hospitality did not stop with the warm welcome. When we got inside, every inch of counter space in our new kitchen was covered. The pantry was full. The fridge was stocked. Cleaning supplies were under the sink, and the counter was neatly lined with paper towels, aluminum foil, and ziplock bags. The pastor nominating committee had arranged an old-fashioned "pounding." In days past a new pastor was greeted at the manse with a "pounding": church members would bring a pound of sugar, a pound of flour, a pound of butter, a pound of coffee. We were in a new town with a new church call, and our new home was filled with food, cleaning supplies, and paper goods. I think we went three years before having to buy dishwasher detergent!

We had arrived in the new town ready to teach this church what all we had learned about God through our formal education in seminary. But before we even opened our mouths, they taught us about God's abundance—God's abundant love, God's abundant grace, God's abundant hospitality.

I have learned a term for this kind of welcoming spirit we encountered on our move to Albemarle: *Cana-grace*. David Steele coined this term; a Presbyterian pastor and writer, Steele used the term *Cana-grace* to describe his church's knack for throwing a good party and their commitment to

hospitality.¹ As Steele describes it, *Cana-grace* points towards God's abundance; *Cana-grace* calls us to respond with abundant hospitality.

The concept of *Cana-grace* comes from today's passage. Jesus, his mother, and the disciples attended a wedding in the small town of Cana. The wine ran out. Jesus declared that it was not yet his time. His mother told the servants to do what Jesus said, and somehow, those jars filled to the brim with water were then filled to the brim with the best quality wine.

During Jesus' time, a wedding was not celebrated with a honeymoon, but with an elaborate wedding feast. The feast would be held at the groom's house and would last a whole week.² The trouble was, the wine was running out before day seven. There would have been shame on this family—shame that does not quite connect with our Western concept of hosting and hospitality. If the wine ran out early, the beginning of this marriage would be shadowed; they would be known for their failure at hosting in a culture that placed a great deal of value on hospitality; the beginning of their marriage would be clouded with shame.

Jesus to the rescue. Jesus rescued the family from shame and judgment. Jesus rescued the feast from an early ending. Jesus filled in the missing pieces of hospitality. Jesus did the one thing that is needed to keep this party going: Jesus turned water into wine—not just enough, and not mediocre, but an overabundance of good wine. Jesus is presented with a situation, and Jesus responds with abundance.

Our world promotes the fear of scarcity, teaching us to stockpile and to defend for our own good. But *Cana-grace* points towards God's abundance; *Cana-grace* calls us to respond to the world with abundance.

I am not much of a 3-point sermon preacher, but today I have 3 points for you—three vignettes of *Cana-grace*: 2 communities who extended abundant hospitality and one opportunity missed.

The first vignette took place on September 11, 2001; the World Trade Center and Pentagon had been attacked. In response to these acts of terror, American airspace was closed; all planes that were in the air had to land right away; international flights were sent to airports outside of the United States. Thirty-eight planes landed in the small town of Gander in Newfoundland, Canada. The town had about 10,000 residents, and in one day they took in an extra 7,000 travelers. There were a number of ways the residents could have responded to these visitors. There were real reasons to be afraid, wondering if any of these planes carried more hijackers, wondering if they were putting the town in danger by taking in these strangers. But the town did not act from fear; they were presented with a situation and responded with abundant hospitality. Homes were opened and schools were turned into living spaces. Car keys were handed over. Food was cooked and served. The town's bus drivers were on strike, but they walked away from the picket line to serve the new guests. Toys, toiletries, clothes, and prescription medications were trucked in from surrounding towns.³ These strangers—these refugees—were welcomed, warmly and abundantly, by the residents of Gander. *Cana-grace*.

The second vignette comes from the 1960s in the segregated South. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in Memphis in 1968. His funeral was held in Atlanta and included a 3-mile procession from Ebenezer Baptist Church to Morehouse College. It is estimated some 150,000 people traveled to Atlanta for the funeral. Following Dr. King's assassination, emotions were high; white supremacy had been the norm, but was being challenged. A white man had assassinated the prominent leader of the Civil Rights movement. The air was thick with tension; riots broke out in over 100 cities.⁴

There were a lot of reasons to lock doors up tight in Atlanta in April 1968, but instead, some churches saw a reasons to open their doors. Central Presbyterian in downtown Atlanta had a new pastor at the time, Randy Taylor; he made a call to Atlanta's mayor with a problem, and the problem was related to the funeral. Rev. Taylor was not the first to call the mayor with a concern, but it wasn't a problem the mayor was expecting. The church was going to host 300 visitors in their building; they had plans to feed a few thousand and to provide living quarters in private homes for as many as they could. The problem was...they needed 600 more blankets.⁵

Churches like Central Presbyterian and their pastor, Randy Taylor, opened their doors for the visitors. Many of these white churches welcomed African-American visitors for the very first time. There were plenty of reasons to maintain the status quo of segregation and racism, but Central Presbyterian saw one very good reason to open their hearts and their doors: God's abundance. The truth was God's love and grace could not be constrained, and so Central's hospitality extended beyond the barriers segregation put up. The church was presented with a situation, and they responded with *Cana-grace*, with abundant hospitality.

And now for the third vignette: a missed opportunity for *Cana-grace*. The College Conference at Montreat was at the beginning of the month, and we heard a keynote from Eboo Patel. Patel is the founder of the Interfaith Youth Core. He has devoted his life's work to connecting people across faiths for common purposes. Patel told the story of his friend, Greg. Greg grew up in a Presbyterian church located right next door to his high school. When the student parking lot became full, high schoolers would park next door at the church. Church leaders got wind of this and were none-too-pleased. Volunteers got up early, very early, to rope off the church parking lot. The volunteers would let students in, if—and only if—they were members of the church or if they were interested in learning more about Jesus Christ; they would hold parking spots hostage for church membership. Kids would be running late for school, and so they would say, "Yeah, I want to know about Jesus." They would lie, park, and go to school. Greg grew up at this church, and he was bothered by this practice. That church had raised Greg; they would taught him about God's amazing love. The actions in the parking lot did not match up with the lessons in the Sunday School rooms.

I would love to tell you the church changed their mind—that Greg met with session and they began opening up their parking lot—that those same volunteers kept coming out early, not to block off the lot, but to offer breakfast and coffee to stressed out students. But that's not the case. This story does not end with *Cana-grace*, but with a roped-off parking lot. Greg, however, knew the church could do better, and his story does not end with that roped off lot. He went on to college, and when the earthquake hit Haiti in 2010, Greg organized a million meals to be sent to the country.

I have been thinking about this story since I heard it. There were reasons not to open parking lot: liability, loss of needed spaces. But there was a good reason to open the lot, too: *Cana-grace*. God's love knows no limits. God's grace is overflowing and abundant. In response, our hospitality can be abundant, too. At DCPC we do not have a parking lot to rope off. But I have been wondering since I heard this story—what have we roped off? When have we said "no"? Where have we missed the chance to show God's love? Have we missed a chance to act with *Cana-grace*?

Our congregation has said, "yes," to many things; we are saying yes. We have mission partners abroad and locally. I strongly believe our community is stronger because of this congregation's outreach. I still wonder—what opportunities might we as a church be missing? What situations will we be

presented with, and will we respond with abundance? And what about me, personally? You, individually? Are we as individuals responding to the world with abundance? In Gander on 9/11, I hope I would have stayed up all night cooking food and going on toy runs to the next town. In Atlanta in 1968, I hope I would have opened my home and welcomed visitors in town for Dr. King's funeral. I pray that I—that you—I pray that we be so tuned in to God's abundance that we cannot help but be hospitable; I pray that we always respond to the world with abundant hospitality.

Jesus attended that wedding in Cana, and he extended hospitality. Later in the gospel of John, Jesus will feed a crowd of 5,000; Jesus will feed the crowd with *Cana-grace*. From five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus fed 5,000 people. Everyone ate their fill, and twelve baskets of food were leftover.⁶

The world teaches a message of scarcity—that there is not enough to go around. Try telling that to the people of Gander. Or to Central in Atlanta and their pastor. Or to Greg, as he organized a million meals for Haiti.

Our God shows forth abundance—abundant wine at a wedding celebration; abundant food for a hungry crowd; abundant grace from a God who sent God's only Son so that the world might be saved. At the wedding in Cana, Jesus teaches us about abundance and grace and hospitality. Maybe we cannot turn water into wine, but we can respond to the world with *Cana-grace*; we can show forth God's love in abundance. May we have the courage to do so.

¹ Steele, David. "Cana-Grace" in *The Presbyterian Outlook* (April 13, 1992), 6-7.

² Brearley, Robert M. "Pastoral Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Vol. 1, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Taylor Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 260-265.

³ Dvorak, Petula. "On 9/11, a tiny Canadian town opened its runways and heart to 7,000 stranded travelers" in *The Washington Post* (September 10, 2016).

⁴ Beckham, Jeff. "How The Days Leading Up To King's Funeral Played Out In Atlanta. WABE Public Broadcasting Atlanta. Pub. April 5, 2018. <https://mlk.wabe.org/days-leading-kings-funeral-played-atlanta/>

⁵ Smith, John Robert. *The Church that Stayed* (Atlanta: The Atlanta Historical Society, 1979), 102-103.

⁶ John 6:1-14.