

**“Abundant Wine, Abundant Life”**  
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 1/19/25

Last fall, my friend Kari Olson, who is the pastor of East Falls Presbyterian Church, got married here at PCCH. After a champagne and cookies reception in Widener Hall open to all the members of Kari’s church, the wedding party and invited guests moved onto the Morris Arboretum for dinner and dancing. The Arboretum requires parties to provide their own alcohol, so Kari and her husband Jason made a special plan for drinks. Jason is friends with the brewer at Yard’s, and this connection allowed the couple to purchase beer at a discount and get custom labels for all the bottles. They ordered 72 bottles each of four different kinds of beer. Their caterer assured them that 288 beers was way too many – they probably only needed about a third of that. But they figured, hey, while we have the opportunity...

After the wedding, Jason and Kari went back to the Arboretum to collect their leftovers. Out of curiosity about how much their guests drank, they counted up the remaining bottles. Kari was in charge of counting the IPAs. There were 76. How could there be 76? They had only ordered 72 to start with. Some had to have been drunk at the wedding, and she was sure they had given at least one whole six pack away to a family member. So she counted again. Still 76. The perfect number for a couple who met and got married in Philadelphia. And some kind of miracle.

In the gospel of John, the works that Jesus performs aren’t called miracles. Rather John refers to them as signs: signs that reveal God’s glory, that point us toward the truth of Jesus Christ as the revelation of that glory. And the first of Jesus’s signs takes place at an ordinary wedding in an ordinary town. I’m not even sure Jesus meant to do it.

It all starts when his mother – who is never given a name in John – notices that the wine has run out. An attentive guest, that woman. Perhaps she wants to save the hosts, who seem to be family friends, from embarrassment. So she approaches Jesus with a simple observation: “They have no wine.” I see a twinkle in her eye as she says it. Clearly she knows Jesus is capable of doing something about this emerging crisis of hospitality – makes you wonder what he got up to in the backyard at home.

Jesus snaps back that his hour has not yet come. [through gritted teeth] “C’mon, mom! You’re embarrassing me!” Perhaps here at the beginning of John’s Gospel, Jesus just wants to lay low for a little while longer, wants to enjoy this time with family and friends before he goes public with his deeds of power. But his mother is undeterred. In fact, she ups the ante by going ahead and telling the servants to “do whatever he says.” Jesus is backed into a corner – by his own mother! – and he knows it. He tells the servants to fill six large ritual jars with water and then draw some out for the chief steward, the man in charge of portioning the wine throughout the party.

When the chief steward tastes it, his response is surprise. Usually you serve the good wine first, when your guests’ taste buds are sharp and discerning. But this wine made by Jesus, introduced late in the party – it’s the good stuff. Not only does Jesus make a great quantity of wine – 150 gallons or so, or the equivalent of about 750 bottles the way we measure today – not only does Jesus make a great *quantity* of wine, Jesus makes a great *quality* of wine. The best part is that the hosts and guests are none the wiser. Only the disciples and the servants know what Jesus has done. And because of this, they believe in him.

I don’t know about you, but the whole thing gives me a good chuckle. This story isn’t meant only for humor, though it does provide a bright and brightly human spot in what can otherwise be a high-minded and philosophical gospel. But beyond that, John tells us that this sign of turning water into an abundant quantity of high-quality wine reveals Jesus’s glory.

For one thing, this sign shows us that our God loves a party. The joys of human life are worth celebrating, and worth celebrating well. God delights in our joy and rejoices with us. Maybe God even multiplies the beer at an ordinary wedding in our ordinary town – not that there’s anything ordinary about this city of ours, of course.

And this miraculous sign of abundant wine also points us toward another truth of the gospel: God desires abundance for us. Not just enough wine to make it through the party, but wine overflowing. Not just good enough wine that no one will notice a drop in quality, but the choice fruit of the vine. Later in John, Jesus will tell the gathered crowds, “I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly.” Not just enough life to squeak by – abundant life, a life overflowing with God’s grace. God desires abundance for us, for all people.

God desires abundance for us all, so why do so few people have what they need? In 1964, Martin Luther King, Jr. discussed abundance and scarcity in his [Nobel Lecture](#), given at the University of Oslo the day after he was awarded the Nobel Peace

Prize. Reading it again this week, I was struck, as I often am when I read Dr. King, by the timeliness of his words. The whole speech can easily be found online and I commend it to you.

King opens by arguing that the rush of technology in the twentieth century, while inspiring, has not produced an accompanying growth of the human soul. He says, "There is a sort of poverty of the spirit which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually. We have learned to fly the air like birds and swim the sea like fish, but we have not learned the simple art of living together as brothers."

He goes on to discuss three interconnected problems which require our attention if humanity is to flourish: racial injustice, poverty, and war. In the section on poverty, he describes a shift in our Western understanding of the world, away from the conclusion of eighteenth and nineteenth century academics that the world lacks the resources to support a growing population, toward the more scientific assertion made by contemporaries of King, that there is enough for all and enough to spare.

So, King asks, "Why should there be hunger and privation in any land, in any city, at any table, when man has the resources and the scientific know-how to provide all mankind with the basic necessities of life?" The answer, he concludes, is that "there is no deficit in human resources; the deficit is in human will." The well-off have become indifferent and oblivious, King argues; we have made poverty invisible to protect our own comfort. He sees the need for a "fierce struggle" against poverty, akin to the fierce struggle against racial injustice, so that "the infection and sickness of poverty [can] be exposed and healed; not only its symptoms but its basic causes."

Ultimately, King concludes, this struggle belongs to all of us. "A great nation is a compassionate nation," he declares. Quote: "No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for 'the least of these.' Deeply etched in the fiber of our religious tradition is the conviction that men are made in the image of God and that they are souls of infinite metaphysical value, the heirs of a legacy of dignity and worth. If we feel this as a profound moral fact, we cannot be content to see men hungry, to see men victimized with starvation and ill health when we have the means to help them," end quote.

Conditions and technologies are different than they were sixty years ago when King gave this speech; for example climate change may soon threaten our ability to provide food and safety to the whole human family. But at least for the moment, there remains enough, and enough to spare. And yet we still struggle to provide all with what they need, especially in this ordinary, extraordinary city of ours.

As individuals and as a nation, we are still in need of that moral growth that King preached about. We still need to grow in compassion, and in our collective willingness to acknowledge and address the injustices of our society. Where does that growth begin? I think the local church is a good place to start.

Earlier this week I was chatting with a pastor friend from the class in which I first studied this speech of Dr. King's. I reminded her that King says the problem is not a lack of resources but a lack of will. "But some of us do have the will!" she responded. "Sometimes we just need to be reminded of what we can do!" She pointed to Jesus's mother at the wedding where the wine ran out all those years ago. Jesus's mother knew what he was capable of. She saw that he wasn't planning to use the resources he had to address the problem. So she gave him a nudge: "they have no wine." And to the servants: "do whatever he tells you."

Sometimes we need a nudge too. We need to be reminded of the resources we have, the power we have. Sometimes we just need someone else to encourage us to use our gifts. And that's what the church is here for. We're here to remind each other of the abundance we have from God. We're here to encourage each other to use the gifts of the Spirit given to each one of us. We're here to help each other grow. And we're here for the benefit of our wider community, that all might have what they need to flourish.

So, I'll see you after church to make sandwiches? Putting together lunch bags and casseroles, we'll be addressing symptoms, not basic causes. But we'll be making sure our neighbors have what they need for today. And we'll be keeping our hearts soft and compassionate, tilling the soil of our souls so that love for our fellow human beings can grow.