

Sunday, January 20 and Wednesday, January 23, 2019
Second Sunday after the Epiphany + John 2:1-11
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marshall, WI
“Abundant Grace” + Rev. Nancy M. Raabe

Today is the second Sunday after the Epiphany, the second of seven this year before we arrive at Transfiguration. Epiphany isn't a season, it's a period of time whose length is determined by what date Easter falls on. If Easter is later there are more Sundays after the Epiphany, up to as many as eight; if earlier, and there are fewer. In 2021 we get only four Sundays after the Epiphany while we'll have all eight in 2025.

Epiphany is one of my favorite times of the liturgical year because in these Sundays Jesus is being revealed to the world. The word means “a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something.” When we talk about “having an epiphany,” a bulb has come on in our head. It is a sudden understanding of something that we hadn't been aware of before. Having an epiphany is seeing the light. Being in the time of Epiphany is seeing Jesus.

Look back and you'll see how this revelation of Jesus and what he brings has been unfolding. Two weeks ago, on the Day of Epiphany, Jesus was revealed to the magi as God's love born in human form for the whole world, including people from distant lands. At Jesus' baptism last week, Jesus was revealed to crowds at the Jordan River as the Son of God for the whole world, represented by the great masses of

people. And today we find the fullness of God's grace that comes to us in his Son revealed in the incredible abundance of Christ's gifts.

Abundance here in the form of as much as 180 gallons of wine for a wedding party—far more than could be consumed at a single gathering. The astonishing amount is meant to shatter traditional ways of seeing the world and reveal to us that Jesus is doing an entirely new thing.

But perhaps to many of us, the idea of abundance rings hollow right about now. As you know much better than I do, Wisconsin's dairy farms are being hit hard; I could hardly believe it when I read that we are on track have lost more than 600 farms in 2018, on top of losing 500 in 2017, as farmers are squeezed between high prices for input and low prices for what they produce. The entire industry is being affected, for example with fewer big pieces of farm equipment being sold and fewer mechanics needed to care for them.

The government has been partially shut down for 29 days and 10 hours. You can find shutdown clocks online ticking off the minutes and seconds of pain. Families depending on government paychecks are growing desperate. Basic services designed to keep people safe are stressed or are simply not happening.

And it's become old news that churches are hurting, especially in rural areas. It is a sad fact that in some ELCA congregations there is often never enough – not enough money, not enough attendance, not enough people to do the work that is needed. For

some the only option is to close, although they hang on until there is no thread left to hang by. An ELCA church in Portage with a proud history but declining attendance ended up struggling along for years with a congregation of two—the pastor and the woman who was head of the altar guild. When he had stroke, that was it, and the Synod office was left to clean out a building crammed with rusted and broken-down stuff that once had been among the finest you could find. For these struggling churches it is as if the story of the wedding at Cana ends at verse 3: “They have no wine.”

But Jesus is doing a new thing. Today we find ourselves in the midst of the first of seven signs in John’s Gospel that point to Jesus’ true identity as the Son of God and bringer of new life.

It is an odd setting, when you think of it; Jesus, his disciples, and his mother are at the wedding of a nameless couple who must have been close to Jesus’ circle. The party is going along when Jesus’ mother notices, as mothers will do, as in fact my mother did at our wedding, that the wine has run out. Mary reports this to Jesus and he shoots back what sounds like a mild rebuke: “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.” Mary isn’t upset because she’s heard it before; remember what the 12-year-old Jesus said when she and Joseph lost track of him in Jerusalem and finally found him in the temple? Instead of him apologizing for not telling them where he was going, he reprimanded them: “Why are you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”

Brushing it off here at the wedding, Mary tells the servants to do as Jesus asks. He directs the servants to top off six 30-gallon jugs that are filled with water. Right before the servants' eyes, it is changed into wine. It's interesting to note that only they know what really happened. The outsiders have become insiders, another sign of how things are going to be in the kingdom of God.

This miracle of water transformed into wine reveals God's abundant grace made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. But it is not merely a scene to be witnessed; it is an act to be experienced. Picture being a guest at the reception and being abruptly told that, sorry, now all we have to drink is water. Not only would this put a damper on the party, it would be highly embarrassing for the hosts. Then imagine everyone's delight when the wine suddenly begins flowing again—and not just any wine, but a rare and costly vintage, in seemingly endless supply.

This is the experience of abundant grace that we find when we meet Jesus. When we open our hearts to him, he fills every empty place in our souls to overflowing with assurances of grace—that we are God's dearly beloved children just as we are, and that this boundless love flowing to us frees us from all the fears that keep us from living as the unique and gifted persons that God created us to be.

If you want to see at a glance how the abundance of God's grace is being poured down on our congregation, come to the Annual Meeting next Sunday. There

you'll find stories of the varieties of gifts, as described by Paul in our second reading, that are bringing us together in new life as God's beloved community.

And as John's Gospel goes on to make clear, these acts showing the abundance of God's grace always create or restore relationships. For the lame man in John 5 who had lain under a city gate for 38 years, the act of standing and walking restores him to active participation in his community. For the man born blind in John 9, the act of seeing again opens him to a life of discipleship. For Lazarus in John 11, raised from the dead, the next chapter finds him hosting a dinner party for Jesus with his sisters Mary and Martha.

The abundance of God's grace is not about personal piety, but is a radical sign of the coming of God's kingdom for all God's people. In community, here at Holy Trinity, we are living out of this abundance as those for whom Jesus is our North Star – our way, our light, the focus of our new orientation in which everything we do is done in love. This is what it means to be church together—living in the abundance of God's grace.

Amen.