

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
February 10, 2019  
John 2:1-11

## “A Letter to Sherrie and Eric on the Occasion of their Marriage”

Dear Sherrie and Eric,

Today is a big day in your life because you're getting married! When you called me a few weeks ago to tell me you wanted something low-key for your wedding, perhaps something after church where people could stay and witness it if they wanted to, I was thrilled when you agreed to my suggestion to have your ceremony during worship, when everyone here – your church family – could be present to surround you with their love, offer you their support, and pray with you and for you as you begin this new life together.

Now, I will admit, that this is a first for me – I've never had anyone take me up on the suggestion to get married during worship! When I was first ordained, the minister I worked for in Stevens Point, WI convinced 3 couples to do what you're doing, and I thought it was pretty neat. But up until now, no one has ever taken me up on it! So thank you for indulging me. But most importantly, thank you for letting all of us be a part of your big day. It not only says a lot about the two of you, your faith, and your love for the church that you would get married in this way; it says a lot about the church, and the people here, too – that you've shown Sherrie and Eric such love and support throughout their courtship and engagement that they'd want you to be a part of this celebration.

Just shy of 16 years ago, my daughter Julia (who is 16 years old today) was baptized. My husband Terry and I made the decision early on that we didn't want to baptize our children because we just wanted to be parents that day. A minister by the name of Paul Reiter baptized Julia. He was a colleague of my husband's and when he baptized Julia he wrote a letter to her for his sermon that day. I thought that tradition was pretty neat so ever since then I have written letters as my sermon for the children I have baptized and, later, with those who were

confirmed. So Sherrie and Eric, when you agreed to get married during Sunday worship, I knew I wanted to write a letter to you as my sermon for the day.

Before we get into the scripture passage for today, let me offer you two pieces of advice that were given to me when I got married 23 years ago.

The first piece of advice was given to me by my sister, and it's quite simple: 2 tubes of toothpaste, she said. Two tubes of toothpaste. If one of you uses Crest and the other Colgate, or whatever the case may be, stick with it. There's no need to share toothpaste and, more importantly, there's no need to fuss over something as trivial as toothpaste. Save your arguments for the things that really matter. The extra money you spend on toothpaste over the years will be well worth it.

The other piece of advice that I want to share with you today was given to me by Aunt Mary. Her advice isn't as simple as my sister's, but coming from a woman who was married for more than 50 years, it's wise advice and worth repeating **and** remembering: Marriage, she said, isn't 50-50. It's more like 90-10. There will be days you give 90%, and there will be days you take 90%.

Now I have to say that her advice really struck me at the time, because everyone says that marriage is 50-50, or at least it should be 50-50. Right? But I can tell you 23 years into my marriage that while there are plenty of days that are 50-50, there are those that are 90-10. When I grumble about picking up my husband's dirty socks for the umpteenth time, or wonder why he hasn't done this, that or the other while I have *clearly* been giving 90%, I try to stop and remind myself that there are days when I only contribute 10% and readily take the 90 he's giving. There are just days like that . . .when the dishes pile up, the bank account runs low, and the kid (or sometimes, kids) just don't want to cooperate and you'll wonder why you're the only one doing anything about it. Remember on days like that, that sometimes we give 90, and sometimes we take 90, and hopefully in the end it will all even out.

In a few minutes, you'll hear me read from what was called, in our older liturgy, a statement on the gift of marriage. In this statement we affirm what we believe – that marriage is a gift from God; and that you're today here to seek God's blessing upon your marriage. You'll also hear me say that "Those who marry are called to a new way of life marked by grace, fidelity and mutual respect, as they bear one

another's burdens and share one another's joys." And that today, "we surround you with our affection and prayer, giving thanks for all the ways that God's love is made manifest in our lives."

Earlier, we heard the story of the wedding at Cana, and in that story we see God's love made manifest in the miracle of turning water into wine. It's a great story (Most wedding stories are!) because in this story Jesus doesn't just turn water in wine, he turns a lot of water into really good wine. A number of years ago when I preached on this story, I asked congregation members to bring in empty bottles of wine so they could see just how much wine it was. But my congregation – who liked their wine – couldn't drink enough because by all accounts, Jesus turned 757 bottles of water into wine. That's a lot of wine. In fact, in order for me to get an accurate count for my display, I had to ask a wine maker to loan me some empty bottles! And there were so many bottles that we had to line them along the aisles of the sanctuary, the window sills, the perimeter of the communion table . . . and on and on they went. It was a good visual reminder of just how much wine we're talking about.

Someone noted that while wedding customs differ from culture to culture, one thing they all have in common is a family reunion and a party. In first-century Palestine, the wedding begins when the groomsmen go to the bride's house and bring her to the bridegroom's home for the ceremony and party. There was no honeymoon, but the wedding party was quite an affair; it went on for days. People must have dropped in for a while, left to attend to business, get some sleep, and then returned for more eating and drinking and singing and storytelling and celebrating—just like a modern wedding reception, but more so.

They are remarkable events, wedding receptions are, not to mention the fact that there are so many details to plan for. The wedding itself can be a disaster waiting to happen. And sometimes disasters do happen. I've officiated at weddings where the groom was 45 minutes late; where the bride forgot the wedding rings and yelled -- in the middle of the ceremony to her friend in the last pew, "Hey, can you run and get the rings. I left them in my bag!" At my own wedding reception held at my parent's house, a fuse blew which caused the electricity to go out temporarily, and the caterer had to make an emergency trip to the grocery because they ran out of champagne. And in the wee hours of the morning, after all the guests had gone home, my Dad and brother-in-law found themselves

wandering the neighborhood in their tuxedos looking for my beloved dog Roxanne who they thought had run away, only to have my Mom find her in the morning behind the water heater in the basement, which had busted overnight.

At the wedding in Cana disaster strikes when the wine runs out. It was a major faux pas and constitutes a crisis for the bridegroom's family who shoulders the responsibility of hospitality. Jesus' mother notices it first and steps in to solve the problem. "They have no wine," she tells her son. In other words, "Do something!" But Jesus, in what I consider to be one of his sassier retorts, says, "What concern is it of mine?"

But Mary, taking no notice or not caring what he says, tells the stewards to do what he tells them to do. He considers his options. There are six huge stone water containers at the door of the house. Guests customarily wash their hands in them as they arrive. "Fill them with water," he says. The servants do—fill them to the brim, thirty gallons each. "Take some to the steward," he says. I can imagine the shock, maybe the sneers: "You have to be kidding. Who is this guy anyhow?" But they do it: take a ladleful of what they know is water—they just put it there—to the steward, who has a sip and approves. It's good wine. It's really good. A lot better, in fact, than what they had been serving. And in what has got to be one of the better lines in the Bible, the steward proclaims, "Wow! Everyone serves the good wine first and then the cheap stuff after the guests are drunk. But you've kept the good wine until now!"

Now of all the miracles Jesus could perform: bringing a little girl back to life, stopping a woman from bleeding; bringing sight to a blind man; why would John put this one first?

For the simple reason that John, who calls miracles "signs" because they point us toward something else, wants us to know that this miracle points us to a God who abundantly provides; whose grace flows abundantly; and who loves us abundantly. John wants us to know, first and foremost, that God loves us more than we could ever imagine. 757 bottles worth of love, to be precise. John wants us to open our eyes and see the extravagant abundance of things all around us—of beauty, of the world's fertility, of the goodness of creation, flowers and stars and moon and sparkling expanses of snow, of newborn babies, of human

compassion and caring, of human love – of two people pledging their love to one another.

It's such a simple message, but sometimes we need the reminder, that God wants us to laugh and celebrate and enjoy life!

James McBride Dabbs, an author and Presbyterian elder, remembers religion as the opposite of life in rural South Carolina. "Religion was a day and a place: religion was Sunday and the church: almost everything else was life. It came around every week, but it didn't seem to have much to do with the rest of life, that is, with life." The miracle at Cana tells us that Jesus served a God who puts joy into life, who thinks it is worth a miracle to keep the party going as we celebrate people.

Friends, God does not want out religion to be too holy to be happy in. As William Sloan Coffin once said in a sermon on this story, "Jesus first visits people not in their sorrow, but in their joy. . . . What does this say to gloomy Christians? Mind you, I'm not suggesting that all, or even most, of the sorrows in the world are to be found in the churches. But there are an awful lot who seem to forget that if only one tenth of what we Christians believe were true, we still ought to be ten times as excited as we are." (William Sloane Coffin, "On Changing Water to Wine: Collected Sermons")

We should be ten times as excited as we are, because the deeper implication in the story is that Jesus . . . God . . . comes into this world, into your life and mine at its most human, simply because God loves us – and that's profound – so profound that the only appropriate response is joy.

But this isn't a superficial joy, a "don't worry be happy" joy. This is an honest and profound joy that believes God is with us on the 90% days, and on the 10% days.

Throughout his life and his ministry, Jesus of Nazareth celebrated people – people getting married, people being healed of disease and deformity, people enjoying meals together. He carried a spirit of celebration with him wherever he went as he proclaimed a God of mercy and peace and joy. This joyous feast at Cana is still a sign to the church that we're to rejoice in the people of God and to toast the world with the amazing good news of grace.

And so Sherrie and Eric, today we toast you, celebrate with you, and surround you with our prayers and love and support. Wherever you go, remember the grace of God and God's assurance that you belong to the God who created you, and that God loves no matter what.

Sherrie and Eric, may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord be kind and gracious to you, and may the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace today and every day.

Blessings,

Pastor Annie

*A sermon delivered to Sherrie Steiner and Eric Evans on the occasion of their marriage at First Presbyterian Church on February 10, 2019.*