

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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John 2:1-11

“When Weddings Go Awry”

Today we get to go to a party. Even with the frigid temperatures and gray skies and craziness of the world and changes thrust upon us that we'd rather not accept . . . we get to go to a party. And I don't know about you, but I could use a good party. The kind where we kick up our feet, and eat good food, and dance like we don't care who is watching!

But we're not going to just any party, we're going to a wedding. The wedding at Cana to be precise. And at this wedding we see God's love made real 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.

Many years ago at my former congregation when I preached on this story, I asked church members to bring in empty bottles of wine so we could see just how much water Jesus turned into wine. 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 the display, I had to ask a wine maker to loan me some empty bottles! And there were so many wine bottles that we had to line them along the aisles of the sanctuary, the windowsills, the perimeter of the sanctuary . . . and on and on they went. It was a great 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, where the wedding at Cana would have taken place, weddings begin when the groomsmen go to the bride's house and bring her to the bridegroom's home for the ceremony and reception. There was no honeymoon, but the reception was quite an affair; it went on for days. People would have dropped in for a little while, left to attend to business, maybe get some sleep, and then

return for more eating and drinking and singing and storytelling and celebrating— just like a modern wedding reception, but more so (on steroids).

They are remarkable events, wedding receptions are, not to mention the fact that there are so many details to plan for, and 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!" I've officiated at a wedding in a hospital chapel after the mother of the bride had a massive stroke the night before the wedding but insisted the wedding proceed, so the bride decided it would be at the hospital so her Mom could attend. I officiated at my niece's wedding with the worst case of laryngitis ever, couldn't say a word! – so I just stood there, while my husband Terry did most of the talking. Oh, I have all sorts of wedding stories to tell and I love them all!

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 store 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 constituted a crisis for the bridegroom's family who shouldered the responsibility of hospitality. Jesus' mother notices it first and steps in to save the day. "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, "Woman 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. Jesus considers his options. Well, 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. And 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?” But they do it: take a ladleful of what they think is water to the wine 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 for us; whose grace flows abundantly; and who loves us abundantly. John wants us to know, first and foremost before we dig into the rest of the story, 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 to 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! But do we always do that? Or do we spend too much time worrying and fretting or complaining and griping? The Reverend William Sloane Coffin once said, “Jesus turned water into wine, but we in the Church have become very good at turning the wine back into water.”

And yet, God does not want our religion to be so holy we are unhappy in it. Again, 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 sourpusses 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.

Throughout his life and his ministry, Jesus of Nazareth celebrated people – people getting married, people being healed of disease and deformity, and 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 to us that we’re to rejoice in the people of God and to toast the world with the amazing, good news of grace.

And yes, I know there is a lot going on in the world. But let us not forget that our first and foremost task, as the old catechism says, is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Let us not forget that Jesus didn’t condemn the partygoers at Cana; He blessed them and to reminded them of the abundance God provides. And that same abundance is available to us today. We don’t have to let the darkness of the world consume us. We are invited to live differently, to be vessels of joy that overflow into the lives of others.

So stop dooms scrolling and instead dwell on the good news: that Christ is with us, that love has already won, and that there is a hope and a future that cannot be taken away. It means seeing the small miracles in our daily lives and celebrating them—the laughter of a child, the kindness of a stranger, the beauty of creation.

Joy is not passive; it's a discipline. It's also a choice to trust that the same Jesus who turned water into wine is still at work, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary, bringing life where there was none. It's a choice to believe that even amid chaos, there is reason to celebrate.

And so let us trust that Jesus comes to fill us, and fill us to the brim, with living water that is transformed into the fullness of celebration and joy. With grace and love that is lavish and abundant. With the promise of new life and hope for restoration for all people. Jesus comes into our midst and celebrates with us wherever we are, however we are, and then leads us into an even deeper understanding of joy. The wine that Jesus provided in those once empty vessels wasn't just cheap stuff to keep people happy for a little while; it was the finest of wines.

So let us remember what the miracle in this story points us to: that the party will go on, and more than that, it won't just wind down as people stumble home, it will continue and flourish. And it only gets better from here.

Amen.