

Psalm 36:5-10
John 2:1-11

Second Sunday After Epiphany
Midway Presbyterian Church
January 20, 2019

A Village Wedding Feast

Introduction to the Psalm

In our Psalm for this Second Sunday After Epiphany we hear a profession of faith and also a prayer for help. They come in the midst of opposition and threat. The psalmist's theme is God's steadfast love. We hear of a feast of abundance and a fountain of life. Listen to these words from Psalm 36:5-10...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson today we hear of a strange and astounding miracle. It doesn't involve healing, restoring a child to his parents, or rescue from a storm. In this "first of his signs," the miracle in Cana points ahead toward a wondrous, unfolding story. And it alerts us that this Gospel is not bound by our expectations. The abundance of Jesus' gifts extend beyond all we can ask or think. Listen to these words from John 2:1-11...

Sermon

It has been said that weddings are accidents waiting to happen. For despite the careful planning and rehearsal, something almost always goes wrong at a service of holy matrimony. I recall one wedding that I officiated in Jacksonville, Florida, where the groom was so nervous that just before entering the sanctuary, he had to step outside and throw up.

Then there was the wedding I performed at the Poinsett Club in Greenville where the bride was a friend of mine and the groom was a BMW engineer from Germany. Just as I asked the marriage questions, the groom's cell phone rang. He turned it off, shoved it back in his

pocket, but it rang again. So, being an engineer, he took the battery out! (Turns out it was a friend from Germany calling to wish him well on his wedding day.)

Hazel and I were married on a hot day in August in south Mississippi. Not only did it rain all day, but the air conditioner in the Baptist Church went out, so it was pretty muggy. As Hazel's father was leaving her at the altar, he stepped on her train, almost losing his balance and tearing about an inch of it from the waistband. Later on we were told that at the reception after we had cut the cake, one of the servers had knocked off the top layer. Yes, weddings can have some embarrassing moments. But here we are anyway—51 years later!

The Galilee in which Jesus had grown up was relatively fertile country, at least in comparison with some of the neighboring regions. Its resources enabled many of the people to be self-sufficient. But taxation was oppressive, transportation was difficult, and almost no one had extra income. Feasting and celebration took place only when there was a great occasion. And one of the hallmark events in the life of a family was the wedding of a son or daughter.

In the time of Jesus, the wedding was celebrated not with a honeymoon, but with a seven-day wedding feast at the groom's home. The bride and groom wore crowns and dressed in their bridal robes, treated like a king and queen. In fact, they were addressed as king and queen, and their word was law. But at the village wedding in John 2, something goes wrong. The celebration is in trouble because the wine is running out before the party is over. To be sure, nobody is in danger. Death is not imminent. The world does not hang in the balance. Still, to those who are hosting the wedding festivities, it's a matter of honor and reputation. No doubt the couple's parents would have scrimped and saved to do this right. And family and friends would pass harsh judgment on those who could not carry a wedding off in proper style.

The mother of Jesus notices what is happening and informs her son. Subsequently Jesus provides an abundance of new wine—that oddly tastes better than the old.

So, on the third day after his baptism, Jesus' ministry begins in this blissful setting of joy and abundance, in a seemingly insignificant village called Cana, which was less than ten miles north of Nazareth. The site of Jesus' first miracle—or sign, as John terms it—was this ancient little town of Cana in Galilee. And Galilee was generally hospitable to Jesus, while Jerusalem and Judea were centers of suspicion, rejection, and death.

While Jesus was on a mission to save lost people and establish the Kingdom of God, he took time to attend a wedding and its festivities. Sometimes we forget and think that Jesus was not only involved in teaching, preaching, or healing. But occasions of joy and celebration were part of his life as well. Jesus of Nazareth celebrated with people—people getting married, people being healed of disease and deformity, people enjoying meals together, children being gathered into his arms. He carried a spirit of warmth and joy with him as he proclaimed a God of mercy and peace and joy.

Just weeks removed from Christmas, our Gospel Lesson today provides a healthy reminder of what that holiday is really about. That beneath the layers of traditions, expectations, and obligations; beyond the decorations, gifts, and parties; the point of Christmas is that the Word became flesh, that the eternal God of all creation, in the fullness of time became a human being. That Jesus was a living Lord who was born an infant and placed in a manger; who traveled with his parents to the festival of the Passover in Jerusalem; who worked as a carpenter; who was baptized; and yes, tempted. That he wept in bereavement. That he laughed and enjoyed meals with others—even tax collectors and sinners. That he traveled about with

fishermen and called them to be “fishers of men.” That he threw out of the temple certain money changers who had made “his house” a den of robbers.

In studying our Gospel Lesson we find more meaning than that Jesus saved a bridal couple from shame and dishonor. According to William Barkley, beneath John’s simple stories there is always a deeper meaning.

For example, we read in verse 6:

Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.

And at the command of Jesus the water in them was turned to wine.

For Jews of that time, *seven* was the perfect and complete number. There were seven days of creation. In The Book of the Revelation there are seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets. The word *seven* is used over 700 times in the Bible; 54 of them being in the Book of the Revelation.

So six would be an imperfect number, unfinished, incomplete. And the six stone water pots stand for all the imperfections of the Jewish law. Jesus came, not to condemn the law, but to do away with the old imperfections and put in their place the new wine of the gospel of love and grace.

Furthermore, we are told in verse 6 that each of these six stone water jars held twenty or thirty gallons of water. That would provide up to one hundred and eighty gallons of wine. And surely this was far more than what was needed by the wedding party.

For John, the grace Jesus offers is more than enough and to spare for all. More than enough to save you and me. Remember the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand--where he took five loaves and two fish, proceeding to serve everyone, and when they took up what was left over, there were twelve baskets full. (Mt. 14:13-21)

The Psalmist in today's lesson states the thought of God's abundance this way:

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
 All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
 They feast on the abundance of your house,
 and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
 For with you is the fountain of life. (36:7-9a)

In the fourth chapter of John's gospel we find the story of the woman at Jacob's well:

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (vv. 13-14)

And though we might think this grace is limited, this epiphany at Cana shows us that God's grace is for all. The setting of this first sign is a wedding, where a group of ordinary people have gathered to honor the marriage of a bride and groom. And *all* the guests will get to experience this act of grace. *All* will watch the steward pour wine in their cups when they thought their cups would stay empty. *All* will get that first smell and be surprised. *All* will take that first sip and say, "where did this come from?" *All* will have the opportunity to respond to Jesus' voice and know life abundant (John 10:10). For God's grace is for all.

Even so, as we know only too well, not everyone will find the gifts of Jesus to be welcome. Already we have learned in John 1:11 that, "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." Well, here in chapter 2 we hear the same thought, this time in the statement of Jesus: "My hour has not come."

Early on, John is alerting us to the hour of Jesus' death--his passion, his crucifixion. And in Chapter 17 Jesus acknowledges that his "hour has come." So here in the midst of this joyful story of a wedding celebration, with the first of Jesus' "signs," "the hour that is to come," makes its sad appearance.

However, as John concludes this lesson, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, revealed the glory of Jesus, and through it, his disciples believed in him. They believed that in Jesus a new way of life was created and opened for them. There are many accounts in the gospels of people believing that Jesus worked signs, but did not believe in him as the Son of God. The disciples here believe in Jesus.

In closing recall the Visitation in Luke 1 when Mary goes to see Elizabeth and the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. Remember the angel telling shepherds in the fields the good news of a Savior to be born. Wise men guided by a star to a new king in a manger. The journey to the Passover in Jerusalem when the boy Jesus, in his Father's house, amazes the teachers. His baptism and heaven opening with a voice of affirmation. Now six jars of twenty or thirty gallons each of the finest vintage available to all. All of which is to say that something entirely new and wonderful is present in Jesus—and the disciples believe. And believing means something completely new for them—the old way has passed, a new life now has begun.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31)

Amen.