

Call to Worship

Our God is determined not to be God without us. **Sometimes when we think of God we think in terms of detachment, distance, and divine aloofness.**

This is not the God whom the church celebrates. **God comes to us, enters into our lives, takes up residence where we live, and shows forth as light and glory among us.**

Prayer of Invocation

Holy God, we gather as your people to celebrate the life we have in Christ Jesus, the gifts you have so graciously supplied for our life together as church, and for our mission in Jesus' name. We thank you for the unity in the Spirit which binds us and our diverse spiritual gifts together in love. Help us to be open and receptive to your Spirit now, that we may worship and work as one body in Christ.

The Word John 2:1-11

The Wedding at Cana: On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the celebration. When the wine ran out, Jesus' mother said to him, "They don't have any wine."

Jesus replied, "Woman, what does that have to do with me? My time hasn't come yet."

His mother told the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Nearby were six stone water jars used for the Jewish cleansing ritual, each able to hold about twenty or thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water," and they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some from them and take it to the headwaiter," and they did.

The headwaiter tasted the water that had become wine. He didn't know where it came from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. The headwaiter called the groom and said, "Everyone serves the good wine first. They bring out the second-rate wine only when the guests are drinking freely. You kept the good wine until now."

This was the first miraculous sign that Jesus did in Cana of Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

Living the Word

One Friday night on the TV show 20/20, the topic was Inside the Wedding Industry. They began by sharing a few of the many mishaps that now are history, but still available on You tube for all to see. Diane, a wedding planner said that the greatest issues are that you always have nervous brides and grooms, and the weather is never dependable. When asked what her most important advice for the couple is she replied: "Remain calm, this is all about a day of Love"

From a pastoral perspective it is a sacred moment before God. But this is not always the focus of the day...From my own experience, I know it is usually a long awaited and planned for event. But I also know that it can be a series of accidents just waiting to happen. As people put on clothes and shoes that they have never worn before, change their eating and drinking habits and usually enter the day with a lack of sleep, nerves become just one of the issues...

I always have a talk with everyone at the rehearsal about how they can better prepare for the day ahead, by taking care with food, drink and sleep. And though I have heard and seen many stories of someone in the wedding party fainting, I have yet to experience that.

I have had some interesting things happen at weddings: In theory a Unity Candle is a beautiful moment, but difficult if the candle wont light, which can especially happen at an outdoor wedding. Many years ago I

officiated at a wedding and reception at the lake home of the family. The weather was very hot, but everyone stood on the shoreline for the ceremony. After the service we walked back to the house to find that the icing on the beautiful three tiered cake, made by the brides aunt, had melted and slid from the counter, onto the floor.

There are too many stories to tell right now, but along with the accidents and mishap stories there are many wonderful moments I could share as well. Just the joy of bringing a family together to celebrate a happy moment is enough. So we come to today's scripture of Jesus, the disciples and his mother Mary all invited and attending a wedding. With the help of Jesus and his mother, a mishap is avoided.

This story isn't in the Bible to give us a scripture for weddings. Couples today usually want me to help them choose a scripture for their wedding service. I offer to them the one in Chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes which talks about the right timing for everything – including *"a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing..."* This is found in the Old Testament, written we think by King Solomon, son of David.

I offer them the 'Love Chapter' of I Corinthians 13 which includes *"Love is patient, love is kind..."* written in a letter by the Apostle Paul, it is found in the New Testament. Then I share with them the story of the only mention of a wedding during Jesus' life, this wedding at Cana. Most will choose one of the first two, because Jesus didn't really change the water into wine to give the couple something to hold onto in their future years.

In fact this event could have happened at any kind of party, so the story is not even about the wedding situation. This story isn't here to dazzle us with wedding magic, as Jesus turns water into wine. But it is about the identity of Jesus and his ministry being introduced in a public setting, with important symbols: a joyous wedding, Six Jewish ritual jars; thirsty wedding guests and an abundance of wine.

A Joyous Wedding – One of the greatest honors for a pastor is to be included in the family at the most important moments of that family's lives. This includes: Baptisms, birthdays, Confirmations, Weddings and even some funerals, if it is a time that we can celebrate that person's life. Every wedding I have officiated has been a day of happiness, as I have already spent hours with the couple getting to know them and discussing what kind of changes marriage will make in their lives.

Six Jewish Ritual Jars – These were kept and meant for purification rites of the church. In Jesus time there were many laws of purification, which continued to grow as the Pharisees added more laws as they wanted. The dictionary defines these men as members of an ancient Jewish religious group who followed the Oral Law in addition to the Torah and attempted to live in a constant state of purity; a self-righteous, hypocritical, or sanctimonious person.

This symbol in this story counter imposes the old empty jars, which can also be seen as the old empty Jewish religious rituals against the rich symbol of Jesus overflowing those jars with wine of outstanding quality and astonishing quantity. Old Testament prophecies from Amos the prophet, 9:13 says: *"The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when the one who plows will overtake the one who gathers, when the one who crushes grapes will overtake the one who sows the seed. The mountains will drip wine, and all the hills will flow with it."*

And from the prophet Joel 3:18 *"In that day the mountains will drip sweet wine, the hills will flow with milk, and all the streambeds of Judah will flow with water; a spring will come forth from the LORD's house and water the Shuttim Valley."* So an abundance of good wine is a futuristic symbol, a sign of the joyous arrival of God's New Age.

The next symbol is the thirsty wedding guests – In those days, the custom wasn't for the bride and groom to run off on a honeymoon, but to stay and entertain guest for a seven day wedding feast in the grooms house. But this was only day three of the seven day party and the wedding guest, coming from far and near had expectations of what would be supplied for them. Part of which was the symbol of an abundance of wine. When the wine was running out, Jesus had the servants fill the jars with water for the party to continue

uninterrupted. This new wine was of an outstanding quality, fine enough for the head waiter to notice right away. This new wine was supplied in an astonishing quantity: the jars were 20 to 30 gallon jugs. Jesus supplied 120 to 180 gallons of exceptional wine for the wedding guests.

Cana, was a seemingly insignificant place, ten miles north of Nazareth. It is only mentioned in the Gospel of John and only four times: the wedding; Jesus with the woman at the well; it is where Jesus challenges Nicodemus to be born again from above; and when Jesus returns to Cana to give life to the son of a royal official.

Today's passage begins with "*On the third day.*" Which makes me wonder, what happened on day one and two? So I went back a few verses and read that on day one, John the Baptist introduced his followers, two of which were Andrew and Phillip, to Jesus and they left John to follow Jesus. On day two Andrew brought along his brother Simon, whom Jesus renamed Peter; and Phillip brought Nathaniel. These are some of the disciples who accompanied Jesus to the wedding.

So now we can take a look at the different characters of this story: First the servants. They are just doing their jobs, but in this moment they haven't yet told the headwaiter that the wine is gone. What a colossal wedding mishap. This will reflect on the groom and his family as a misstep of hospitality in their home. Guests will be appalled and leave days too early in the party. They are just the servants, but it will be a strike against them with who knows what consequences before it is done. Imagine their panic in this situation. Is it no wonder that Mary notices that something is amiss.

Next we have the Headwaiter. Having missed the whole out-of-wine-fiasco, he is brought the most recent batch, now to be served. After the taste, he is shocked. Wedding etiquette in ancient Palestine recommended serving the good wine first, then the inferior wine later, when intoxicated guests were less likely to notice. His misperception as to who supplied the better wine after the other was gone, had to be a relief for the servants, and almost humorous to Jesus and the disciples. He then gives the credit of this great wine to the bridegroom. I can almost see Jesus smiling in the back ground.

Bridegroom – totally oblivious of what the head waiter is talking about, with the words - 'saving the good wine' - probably never even questions the situation in the midst of the party. He is probably has stars in his eyes for the bride and is just glad all is going well.

What about Mother Mary? Mary feels somehow responsible to help the situation. She wants to 'fix it.' This problem is of concern for her before it is a concern for Jesus. Her human compassion for the problem ahead is evident. Could it be that God relies on our human compassion to help accomplish the will of God? Mary is done pondering. She poses the question, possibly nudging God, and feeling it is time to nudge Jesus into who she knows he is. "*They don't have any wine.*" This statement implies that Jesus can, and should, do something about it. She affirms his independence to decide with an aside to the servants: "*Do whatever he tells you.*"

So we come to Jesus, and God. Jesus was not trying to be rude to his mother, but he must be guided by his inner calling from God. At first he is reluctant, but in the end he obeys his mother, and what a wedding gift he gives the bridegroom. Jesus celebrated with people. He attended this event knowing it was to be a party. I wonder if Jesus was surprised in the miracle that he was now playing out before everyone. He had told his mother that his time had not yet come, he thought this wouldn't be how God would have him be concerned. But imagine his delight when the miracle did happen.

We don't get enough mental pictures of Jesus in joy, but he was happy in the baptisms and in the healings that he did; he enjoyed the meals and times with his disciples; just as we can. There should be no guilt in 'Holy Joy' and it should not be divvied out sparingly. Jesus declared publically our God as a God of Forgiveness, Peace and Joy. We are to rejoice in the people of God and cheer with the incredible good news of God's unconditional love for us. Christians ought to be celebrating constantly because we have been liberated from the fear of life and the fear of death.

Our God is a God of Joy. For God it was worth a miracle that day to keep the feast going, as they were celebrating people and a holy event. God is not just for Sunday morning, but a part of all of our lives joyful and serious times. Robert Brearly, pastor at St Simon's Presbyterian Church in Georgia says this: "*God does not want our religion to be too holy to be happy in.*"

Our joy flows from knowing our God. God is God and we are not, but could it be that God waits for us to care enough in some cases for the Creator of the Universe to move into action? After all isn't that one of the reasons we pray? To share our passions and our compassions with our Creator, hoping for action? It is a mystery: God acts, or not, according to God's understanding, not ours...

Then there are these new disciples, just getting to know Jesus. They had been invited to the wedding party and they knew how it was supposed to happen. Think of the wow factor in the few moments as this all plays out before them. They now witness the first sign of Christ in public ministry to God's people. They have no idea that they will be told and expected in the next years of their lives to do similar and even greater signs as a witness to Jesus and to God.

And then there is us. First we hear the stories, if we listen we can find and relate to the humanity in the situation. Everyone mentioned experienced the glory of God working in their presence, some got what had happened, some did not. Like the people of this story, from servants to disciples, we can choose to hear the message behind the story or just go on, basically rejecting it. The scripture says that the disciples 'got it,' we don't know about the others present, but they had the same opportunity to at least question what had just happened.

We often recognize good gifts without recognizing their source in the Creator's love. The headwaiter notes that the ability of people to discern even what is good wine, or a good gift can be dulled, both literally by drunkenness, which can be reflected as a sign of the alcoholism even in today's society; and the drunkenness as a metaphor for all of the ways we dull our physical and spiritual perceptions, missing the point of what God is about in our lives and in the world.

Are we called to make the nudges to God through our prayers and the nudges to each other when we recognize where God might be calling someone? It is good when we can recommend someone for ministry as a pastor, as many from this church did for me. But I have needed much encouragement from others as they saw my gifts and calling, blossoming at the beginning of my ministry. If you see gifts in another it is important to encourage them, not just for pastoral ministry, but for all of the ministries of the church or of God.

We are invited to trust so much in the generosity and abundance of God that we, like the perceptive mother of Jesus will nudge God with our observations "they have no more wine" or food or clothing. Shouldn't that be one of our cries to God? Remember how the mother of Jesus swung into action to keep the party going – and Jesus then determined it was his time after all.

Those same symbols can be a metaphor for our lives: Through Jesus Christ, God offers us a joyful existence. Often we hold on to empty jars of what we were told in the past that our religion is to be: stern and serious, filled with rituals that say "This is how we have always done it." We are all thirsty for joy and for an easier way to do church. We hunger for a way to get more young people to church, but we are afraid to let go of our empty jars. Jesus comes into our lives with joy and peace overflowing in abundance beyond our greatest expectations. Our cups runneth over, and our thirst is quenched once we taste the freedom of being Christians in a new way.

We ought to be attracting people to the church, quite literally by the fun there is to being a Christian. After all is said and done, maybe this is a good wedding scripture after all.