

“Life of the Party”
A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – January 16, 2022

Please read:
Isaiah 62:1-5
John 2:1-11

At the church I served in Paris the year prior to my departure, I kid you not, we averaged over *one wedding per day*. Can you believe it? People from all over the world came to be married because, hey, it’s Paris! Let’s just say because of the pandemic, it’s been a little slower here! ☺ I did have the pleasure of performing my first wedding here over at the Roger Sherman Inn last year on Valentine’s Day, and we have some more weddings planned for the summer...

Weddings are those special occasions when you want to give your guests the best hospitality you can, and so people spend as much as they can on the party of a lifetime. In today’s gospel lesson, we read of a wedding celebration that narrowly avoids disaster *because of Jesus...*

In this season of Epiphany, the lectionary focuses on light and revelation texts, and today we read of Jesus’ first miracle in the gospel according to John. Where the other gospel writers record a lot of miracles, John chooses only seven that are highly symbolic, and this is the first: *a party!*

Note that, unlike some of Jesus’ other miracles, in this one, no one is healed. No one is fed. Here, all Jesus does is make a few dozen gallons of fine wine to keep the party going. One of my friends calculated the Greek measurements would equal *575 bottles of wine!* Besides saving that anonymous couple from embarrassment, what good did Jesus mean to do? Of all the ways to begin a gospel, of all the miracles that Jesus could have performed, why does John write about this one first?

Look more closely and you will notice that Jesus doesn’t do anything to perform this miracle. He says no magical words over the jars of water. There was no stunning, miraculous moment. Yes, the servants had to obey Jesus’ simple commands, and we all know that sometimes what Jesus tells us to do may sound a little crazy given our cultural proximity to first century Palestine. It’s interesting to note that apparently no one except the servants were aware that Jesus performed the miracle. Sometimes miracles happen when we simply take God’s word seriously and obey as servants of the Lord. But it pushes it a bit far to make the central message of this story one of how we should trust and obey Jesus.

The source of the miracle is not in the servants filling the water jars on command. *The subject of the miracle is purely Jesus.* John just says that when they brought back the jars, the normal old water had become wonderful wine. Jesus, Emmanuel. By simply being there, Jesus transforms the water into wine.

A key to interpretation may be the odd interchange between Jesus and his mother. Mary comes to Jesus, imploring him to help the host in this awkward social crisis, but Jesus brushes her off with, “Woman, my hour has not yet come.”

Timing is a recurring theme throughout John’s Gospel. Jesus says the hour, his hour, is coming. It is the hour of Jesus’ death, that time when, lifted up upon the cross, all his power

shall be released for the world. In that hour, everything will be made manifest, the veil between us and Jesus will be lifted. Yet now, right here at the beginning, at the beginning of John's Gospel, at the beginning of this New Year, the veil is momentarily lifted.

As the steward tells the bridegroom, "Everyone serves the good wine first, then the poor wine; but you have kept the good wine until now." Do you see? *Jesus is the new wine!* The water in those pots was water used not for drinking, but for Jewish purification rites. Now, with Jesus, there is new blessing, new purification, new revelation. You see, the old containers were empty. It's as though John was making a comment about how religion and social customs need to be repurposed.¹ That's a theme throughout the New Testament... Jesus offers a new way to be clean, to come into relationship with God. No longer do you have to wash yourself, to get yourself right before you are acceptable to God. We are "saved by grace through faith;" we are "made righteous" by what Christ has done for us that we could not do for ourselves!

When Jesus left the wedding at Cana, he still had a long way to go on his journey. There would be less glorious moments for him, times when he would be rejected, humiliated, misunderstood. His hour was to be an hour of intense, terrible pain and suffering. His hour would be the cross. The glory of his first miracle at Cana did not change that. Yet the sign, the glory, enabled Jesus to continue, a sign that God would not abandon him to darkness and death.

Likewise, when you leave this sanctuary, there will be less glorious moments for you on your journey. A sweet hour of worship won't make COVID go away. It won't take away the challenges at work, or at school. We are called back into a world in which hope is in short supply, where marriages fail, where cancer still kills, where leaders are crooked and petty, where racial and gender discrimination and various forms of injustice and unfairness still feels like the norm for too many people...

Yet sometimes you go out different from the way you came in. In worship, perhaps in the singing, in the reading and hearing of the scriptures, in praying, or in reflecting during silence, God reveals something new... and you see, you hear, you believe, and you are changed. The veil between you and God, between eternity and today, is drawn back. Here in our church, as at the wedding in Cana, Jesus is revealed as Lord, as master of all, as the Host of the Party, indeed, as the Life of the Party!

It's the image of a wedding party that Isaiah uses in his exile sermon to portray the final vindication of God's salvation history for the people of Israel. They know better than most how things can go wrong, how oppression can bleed and burn the life out of you. But God promises to make things right. God speaks of hope: "You shall no more be termed forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate... Like a bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."

This is where the gospel of today's texts gets really interesting for me. Bob Ekblad, in his book, *Reading the Bible with The Damned*, asserts that reading the Bible in church is one

¹ See Brian McLaren, *We Make the Road By Walking* (Nashville: Jericho Books, 2014), 98.

thing. Reading it in a prison among murderers and rapists or with a group of recovering alcoholics who have lost everything, or with anyone whom society has marginalized or condemned is another kind of reading... Such people are often disillusioned by the church, because we have rejected them and shown at best indifference, if not scorn to their plight.²

It was Dr. Martin Luther King who we honor tomorrow in our interfaith service, who was a contemporary prophet who reminded us that Sunday mornings are the most segregated time in America. He dreamed of a world where his “four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” We know we have much work to do, but key is working together with “the other,” to listen and learn together...

In the Isaiah text, God was speaking to the exiles in Babylon. The exiles had lost everything of any earthly value, and then they had been literally driven into cultural and economic exile. They were powerless slaves. They were wondering what had happened to God. They knew that they were lost, damned... They were the lowest of the low, but had God also abandoned them?

What happens next is amazing... God tells them a wedding story. No, I’ve not abandoned you, my love. You are my bride. The word for *rejoicing* here in the Hebrew can also be translated as *dancing*. In other words, God is so delighted to take his people up again as beloved that God dances!

Marriage is a metaphor used throughout the scriptures to speak of the relationship between God and God’s people. The prophet Hosea compares Israel to a whore, a prostitute, but God tells Hosea to marry the prostitute Gomer as a sign that God, no matter how unfaithful we may be, is still faithful and will pursue us. It’s all about grace. It’s all about unmerited favour shown to the most unlikely people ...

The question is whether or not we in the church can comprehend the amazing grace of how God has taken us back, sinners that we are; to call us beloved, and to redeem and restore us in loving relationship. I guess the question is whether we recognize how much of a surprise this really is! If we’re not surprised, you see, we don’t know the truth that we once were the damned also. We also were the forsaken, the lost, the forgotten, the hopeless ones...

But God calls us beloved. God delights in and dances over us. Just when it looks like the party is over and we’ve run out of all our own resources, Jesus shows up. The party goes on... No one is excluded at God’s wedding party. God actually chooses the most hopeless despised cases and calls us beloved. The question is, how might the church, like those empty purification jars, need to be repurposed and refilled with new wine to better reveal the gospel of Jesus Christ, God’s love for all people and all Creation?

The Good News on this second Sunday after Epiphany is that God does not run out on us. God saves the best for last. Even when the timing is off, the glory of God’s grace is

² Eugene Robert Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 3-9.

astonishing. Anytime Jesus shows up, be it at a wedding, or worship service... or tomorrow morning at work or school; anytime Jesus shows up, things are transformed. Anytime grace, love and generosity are shown, God's glory is revealed... and our despair turns to hope, fear into faith, apathy to commitment, exclusion to welcome, death to life, and sometimes... even water into wine.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.