

Read lesson: John 2:1-11

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

After years of practice, I have come to know that weddings can get complicated. Lots can go wrong—and does. The ushers are late for the rehearsal. The maid of honor leaves her dress in a hotel room. The flowers aren't delivered on time. The groom forgets the license.

Lots can go wrong. But lots can go right—and always does. Many people cry at weddings, and not just the mother of the bride, but the father, too. Sometimes the bride cries; sometimes the groom cries; sometimes both cry. And in my case, sometimes the minister cries. It's important to have a clean handkerchief handy.

Tears of happiness. Tears of joy. Afterwards, one of the things that usually goes right is the reception, the party. Receptions are remarkable events- they serve as a family reunion, two reunions, in fact. They bring together a group of individuals, most of whom have nothing in common with one another other than their relationship with the bride or groom. And on that basis alone they become a community whose sole purpose is to rejoice, celebrate, and have fun. Someone observed that a fun, robust wedding party is a good representation of the kingdom of God.

One time Jesus attended a wedding. Wedding celebrations went on for days, not just a few hours. There was plenty of eating and drinking, dancing and singing. There was lots of laughter. And at this particular wedding, one of the worst possible things that could happen, happened. The wine ran out. Can you imagine? The steward—the wedding coordinator—is in a panic. The groom is embarrassed. The bride is getting angry. Both sets of parents are irritated that their son and daughter hadn't made better plans. It's not pretty.

Jesus and his new disciples and his mother are there, at Cana, nine miles from Nazareth. Mary, senses the disaster that is unfolding, and essentially says to Jesus, "Do something." His response is a little testy. He says, essentially, "Mom! It's not my problem, and it's not yours either." And then he does something, like every son who has ever been nagged by his mom.

Every Jewish home had a large stone jar, of twenty to thirty gallons, to hold the water required in that home for purification purposes; for hand washing before and after meals, and for washing cups and utensils. Usually, there were six of those jars.

"Fill them," Jesus says. "Fill them all to the top." The wait staff does it. "Let the steward taste it." The steward does: he tastes it, he calls the groom over, and they observe a lovely surprise.

“This is really a good wine, a lot better, in fact, than what we’ve been serving.”

And that’s it. The party goes on. It is a sign, the author of the Fourth Gospel says: a sign of Jesus’ glory. The trouble with signs is that everyone sees them in different ways.

Some have trouble with the idea of Jesus producing such a prodigious amount of alcohol. It has been argued that it wasn’t wine at all but unfermented grape juice. But the text calls it wine, and the Bible is consistently realistic about wine’s benefits and dangers. Of course it was wine. And it was a lot—maybe 180 gallons. I’ve never seen that much wine other than on a winery tour.

It was a lot of wine. It was Jesus’ gift of joy and happiness and celebration.

Some get stuck on the miracle itself. But the miracle is not the point. Jesus is. Jesus and his generous, remarkable, and so-very-down-to-earth, human love. Jesus is the point and the point **is** that what he is doing has something to do with the nature of God.

I love something Wendell Berry wrote: “Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field and the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine, which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water with soil and sunlight is turned into grapes” (*The Art of the Commonplace: Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, p. 311).

Dwight Moody, once had something to say on the subject. Moody was a great evangelist and stressed the power of Jesus to change lives. He told the story of a recent convert who said, “I don’t know whether or not Jesus can turn water into wine, but I know that in my home he has turned whiskey into milk and furniture” (Lamar Williamson, *Preaching the Gospel of John*, p. 28).

The story of Jesus and the wedding at Cana contains, when you think about it, two important and somewhat surprising ideas. The first is that the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Christian religion, has to do with human life at its most human.

Somewhere in our history we got that wrong. In the Old Testament, religion is a worldly, lusty, life-affirming, life-loving matter. It has to do with the rudimentary, ordinary processes of daily life: farming, herding, eating, drinking, living, loving, birthing, and dying.

Historians and theologians say that early Christianity forgot its own beginnings within Judaism and instead fell under the influence of the Greeks.

The Greeks were inclined to be otherworldly, not this-worldly.

They were inclined to divide reality into two separate spheres, matter and spirit, and to conclude that religion had to do with spirit and soul but not body. Under the influence of the Greeks, early Christianity decided that the human body and its appetites and hungers, its needs and passion, was not to be trusted, and certainly not to be celebrated. In fact, it was to be denied, negated. It's where we got the idea that faithful Christianity is about self-denial, self-negation, and that pleasure of any kind is at least suspect.

Puritanism, H. L. Mencken said, is "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy" ("Sententiæ," *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, 1920).

But here is Jesus at a wedding. Here is the Fourth Gospel introducing us to Jesus at a party, where he's not there to say the prayer before the meal but to provide the wine so that the celebration can continue, so that everyone can have a good time.

God does not despise our humanness, our humanity, and neither should we. That's the first intriguing idea that comes from this story.

And the second is that joy is central to the Christian faith. Here, too, we seem to forget our beginnings. Religion, quite simply, is not always very joyful. Conrad Hyers, Professor Emeritus of Religion at Gustavus Adolphus College, wrote a book with the wonderful title *And God Created Laughter* in which he observes that "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Paul and Jesus is imagined to be totally humorless, infinite in gravity. The overwhelming bias has been to associate God and religion primarily with the serious side, preferably our most serious moments. We see ourselves as most religious and reverential when we are at our dreariest and dullest" (p.4).

Sometimes we Presbyterians get referred to as "God's Frozen People" or with a Calvinist twist "God's Frozen-Chosen People." Sometimes the word *Presbyterian* itself is a synonym for grim, stern, somber piety.

But here is Jesus bringing the gift of joy and celebration to a wedding party.

The deeper implication is that in him, his coming into this world, his coming into your life and mine at its most human, is something so good, so profoundly, deeply and powerfully good that the only appropriate response is joy.

There is a lot of it in the Bible. There is a lot of hand clapping and cymbal crashing and trumpet blowing and singing and dancing in the Psalter. When wise men see a star, they follow with great joy. When angels appear to shepherds on the hillside, they announce a great joy for all people.

When frightened disciples find an empty tomb at dawn on the first day of the week, first they are afraid and then they rejoice.

It is not a superficial joy in the Bible, a denial of tragedy, a refusal to be realistic, a Pollyannaish optimism that everything is just fine. Rather joy in the Bible comes in the midst of difficult and trying and sometimes tragic circumstances: exile, loneliness, persecution, suffering, death even. In all of it, God's people continue to be joyful. Why? Not because their circumstances are wonderful, but because they have been promised that regardless of their circumstances, God will not let go, will not abandon, but will be with God's people—wherever they are, whatever is happening to them.

Somehow, someone managed to scrawl on the external wall of the Warsaw Ghetto:

I believe in the sun, even when it does not shine.

I believe in love, even when I do not feel it.

I believe in God, even if I do not see him.

It certainly has not been a week for superficial joy as the images of pain, death and chaos filter out of a devastated Haiti. But our life experience as Christians tells us that something more is present here.

In our own national experience, in the midst of legally mandated segregation and deeply embodied institutional and social racism, Christian preachers such as Martin Luther King Jr. rose up, not only to challenge the law in acts of courageous civil disobedience, but also to challenge African American people to remember who and whose they were.

And the result—even in the midst of slavery and discrimination and persecution and lynching—was a literature and poetry and a music utterly and authentically joyful. “My Lord! What a morning, when the stars begin to fall.” “Go tell it on the mountain.” “There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.” And James Weldon Johnson's wonderful anthem “Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven sing, ring with the harmony of liberty. Let our rejoicing rise—high as the listening skies. Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.”

Let's not be Pollyannaish. It is, in fact, a time for realism. The news is not good.

To be alive is to be intellectually and emotionally worried about our world, our future. To be alive is to grieve the loss of Haitian lives and to lament the continuing and additional loss of life that it will inevitably come.

The reality of our lives is that to be alive means that our personal news is not always good: illness; a sudden, unexpected, out-of-the-blue diagnosis; aging; risky surgery; relationships that are not fulfilling; employment that is disappointing and fragile.

But the promise that we have always heard as God's people is that it is into precisely those so very human places, places where you and I are most human—where our deepest hopes and fears reside, our strongest passions, our dearest love—it is precisely into those places that Jesus Christ comes with transforming power. Jesus comes through us as we act with love. As we give from what we have first been given. As we pray for the presence of God, even, and especially in the midst of the overwhelmingness of death.

It is always the paradox of faith that while the news can be so bad, yet the news is good, so utterly and profoundly good.

We hear it in its simplicity this morning. Jesus came to a wedding, and Jesus provided wine to keep the celebration going.

Thanks be to God.

*We come, O God, on the first day of a new week, early in a new year,  
expecting, hoping for newness, for renewal of spirit, energy, and hope.  
So come to us. Startle us with your truth; open our hearts to your creative love.  
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*