

“A Wedding in Cana”

John 2:1-11

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

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How appropriate that on the same week we celebrate Valentine’s Day, we should be talking about the highest expression of love there is- a wedding! Our account this morning marks an occasion of great celebration, as all weddings SHOULD be; they represent the most important decision two people will ever make. A marriage ceremony between two individuals is intended to mark the beginning of a WHOLE NEW relationship- one it is hoped will mature and long endure throughout their lives together. However, with one out of every two couples now ending up in the divorce courts, you have to wonder whether DIVORCE has become FAR TOO EASY or, as a friend of mine insists, whether MARRIAGE has.

No one ever expects to hear that the wedding itself with all the pomp and circumstance was the HIGH POINT in their relationship although there certainly have been instances of where, once the “I do’s” were exchanged, it all seemed to go DOWNHILL from then on. Ernest Borgnine, whom you may remember as an Academy Award winning actor, was married five times- the THIRD time to the gravel-voiced comedienne, Ethel Merman. Seven years older than Borgnine, Merman was married three times HERSELF and newly divorced from the president of Continental Airlines. In 1964, they met at a cocktail party and soon after, the two were engaged with Merman telling everyone, ‘I’ve never really been in love before.’ Borgnine countered by saying ‘Love at first sight is no myth. Wham, that’s it, I’m as happy as a bug in a rug. This will last forever. You can bet your last dime on it.’

The ceremony took place in the back garden of Borgnine’s home with fifty white doves, thousands of dollars worth of flowers, and thirty-eight violinists playing romantic music. The couple then left for a honeymoon cruise in the Far East. With such a wedding as that, you would have thought Borgnine would have WON that bet and that the union WOULD have lasted forever. However, eleven days into the wedding, Borgnine was already filing for divorce with accusations of terrible tempers and extreme cruelty flying from both sides. Merman joked afterwards, ‘If you blinked, you missed it ...’ while Ernie himself commented: ‘I was married to a lovely lady who was a star. I was married to her for thirty-two days and that was enough.’

This morning’s New Testament text from John ALSO concerns such a ceremony although hopefully with a better outcome. It is a wedding celebration in a small town named Cana in Galilee, not far from the place Jesus grew up. Several years ago, archaeologists announced they believed they had finally found its actual location. In an area known as Khirbet Cana (meaning the “ruins of Cana”) some nine miles from Nazareth, they found a cave that contained a sarcophagus lid inscribed with Maltese-style crosses. It looked like it had been turned on its side to serve as a kind of altar with its top edge worn smooth, perhaps by pilgrims who placed their hands on it during prayer. Nearby were found stone vessels as well as space for four more vessels. “The presence of six stone jars above an alter in a shrine underneath a possible location of the Wedding at Cana strongly suggests that the early Christians of the Byzantine era believed that this was the Cana from the Gospels,” said Tom McCollough, an archaeologist and one of the discoverers.

In my former pastorate in Crown Point, Indiana, the county courthouse was located just down the street from the church; it was a 150 year-old architectural behemoth listed in the national historic registry list. For most of its history, it was MORE well known as a wedding chapel of sorts, where people could come and get married without having to go through a specified waiting period. You only had to show up, pay the fee, and a couple could instantly be pronounced "man and wife," just like in Las Vegas. So scores of people would drive to Crown Point from Chicago, some thirty miles away, who didn't want to have to WAIT before exchanging their "I do's." On display there, you could see the actual wedding license of Rudolph Valentino and it was said that Muhammed Ali and the parents of Michael Jackson got hitched there as well.

In contrast to the way weddings were carried out in Crown Point, marriages in CHRIST'S day were a long and complicated affair. The wedding was preceded by a betrothal which if ever broken required the same procedure as one going through a divorce. The nuptials took place on a Wednesday if the bride was a virgin and a Thursday if she was a widow. They were often held in the evening with the bridegroom and his friends going in a torchlight procession to the home of the bride. Only the bridegroom and his closest friends entered the bride's home while the others waited outside for them. Once inside, that's when the actual wedding ceremony took place. Then there was another procession, this time with all those interested in going to the home of the bridegroom. Here the marriage feast was held and this was often a very lengthy affair that might go on for as long as a week.

This wedding scene actually serves as Jesus's coming out party. He had just been baptized and was now ready to inaugurate his ministry. And where does his ministry BEGIN- at a wedding feast where he changes the old into something new. According to our account, the real drama occurs when the host runs low on wine and Mary takes it upon herself to make sure that more is supplied. She approaches Jesus and asks, "There's no more wine. Is there anything you can you do about it?" Now keep in mind she's not asking Jesus to turn water into wine here. She REALLY wants him to run down to the local liquor store and procure more alcoholic beverage in order to save the host from any humiliation, as I'm sure the hosts of many SuperBowl parties just may be doing THEMSELVES later on this evening. That they had run out of wine was indeed a huge embarrassment for the host, and Mary takes it upon herself to see that this doesn't ruin the celebration. We are told that Jesus first instructs the servants to fill up six water jars, each capable of holding up to 20 gallons of water. These jars had been standing there empty to be used for Jewish purification rites.

When I was growing up, my father would return from the grocery store with a package of effervescent drink tablets called Fizzies which were quite popular during the 1950's and 60's. You would drop one into a glass of plain water and it would begin bubbling and fizzing like an Alka Seltzer until the water was transformed into a strange fruit-flavored drink- cherry, orange, root beer, and the like. I remember my father telling me that if I swallowed the fizzy and then drank water on top of it, my stomach would explode, so you can bet I never tried to put one of them into my mouth. Truthfully though, I did enjoy the fizzing action more than the drink itself which I thought tasted pretty terrible.

Well, Jesus doesn't just insert an additive to the water like Fizzies to change the taste of it. Rather, he made something altogether DIFFERENT out of the water- he made NEW WINE out of it, and he did so in OLD CONTAINERS! This new wine was in fact SO superior to the

ORIGINAL wine which the celebrants had been drinking that upon tasting it, the master of ceremonies could not believe that the BEST wine had been saved for last. Where the usual practice was for people to put out their best wine at the beginning, when the guests were still sober and their palates sensitive, after awhile it would get to the point where most of the celebrants would be drunk so that it wouldn't matter HOW the wine tasted to them.

Well what IS this new wine that Jesus has come to bring? Whatever it is, John is not only telling us that the wine Jesus provides is abundant, but it is of such SUPREME quality that there is nothing quite like it. A number of New Testament references picture the kingdom of God in terms of a great banquet, specifically a wedding feast overflowing with much fine wine. Jesus told his disciples that many would come from east and from west to sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God. He told a parable in which the kingdom of heaven was compared to a king who threw a great marriage feast for his son. He sent his servants out to call those who had received invitations to it, but they all had excuses why not come. Therefore he threw the feast open to ANYONE who wanted to come. Then in Revelation, the people of God were told to rejoice and give God glory for it was time for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, that the Bridegroom—Jesus Christ--and the Bride—the Church—have made themselves ready for the great occasion. In other words, the kingdom of God is described as a great celebration, a wonderful feast filled with the wine of abundance and joy and peace. Like most marriage celebrations where there is much dancing and laughter, fellowship and delight, THIS is what the kingdom of God is MEANT to be—certainly not a lot of angels hanging around strumming harps. As Paul told the church in Rome, “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”(Rom. 14:17)

It is important for us to understand just how significant this scene of Jesus performing his very first miracle at a wedding really IS. What we witness here is that the very FIRST thing he does as God's appointed Deliverer is to publicly demonstrate through this act of changing water into wine how his ministry will usher in a transformation unlike any they had ever seen. It will inaugurate a whole new era in people's relationship with God and with each other and the way they celebrate that relationship— one which will extend well beyond THIS world and into the next. The old wine had run out and Christ the Messiah was here to bring the new. This new wine had been created in the “old” vessels of the Jewish purification rites, symbolizing that the traditionalism and legalism represented by Judaism and the Law were now obsolete. The ancient system of sacrifices and law-keeping was about to be toppled and replaced by a new freedom in the spirit that the people had never known before.

The REAL miracle in our story is not that Jesus turns a pot full of water into the finest of chardonnays. Rather, as a transformation takes place between the bride and the groom by entering into a deep and abiding relationship with each other— the taking of two very separate and unique lives and the making of them as one—so TOO does Christ promise a transformation to take place in OUR lives as we enter into a deep and abiding relationship with HIM. Thus the marriage that took place in Cana was actually meant to point to something even GREATER than a festive wedding in a small town in Galilee— it anticipates the marriage that will eventually take place between Christ and his CHURCH. For John, it serves as a sign of how once WE enter into a marriage covenant with our Lord, we can experience a whole NEW life with an entirely NEW future OURSELVES. By experiencing the grace and the love that comes from One who walks beside us day-after-day and even takes up residency in our heart, then, just like that marriage couple, we become completely new persons AS WELL. As St. Paul wrote in his second epistle

to the Christians in Corinth, “Therefore if any person be in Christ, he (or she) is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”(2 Cor. 5:17)

Thus, the point of the story is to show that Jesus was not simply a miracle worker who could do fabulous things nobody else could do. Rather, it was intended to point out that he was first and foremost a TRANSFORMER OF THE HUMAN CONDITION, that God can take old containers filled with nothing but water and then transform it into the most desirable wine the world has ever tasted. This was in evidence throughout the rest of the gospels, how whenever people came into contact with Jesus, they were never again the same- that he changed people at their core and put a WHOLE NEW power in them. Similarly, he takes old containers such as OURSELVES with our old habits and our old desires with our destructive old memories, and then fills US with NEW wine, that is, with HEALTHY habits and RIGHTEOUS desires and a NEW-FOUND sense of freedom we have never known before. That is what the Good News is ALL ABOUT- it is God's assurance of pardon reminding us that we are ALREADY ACCEPTED by him, that we are ALREADY FORGIVEN, that we have ALREADY become God's children and heirs of an imperishable inheritance, that we are, in fact, NEW whether we know it or not.

In the Prologue of John's Gospel which is found in the previous chapter, chapter one, he tells us, “From his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace.” Not just GRACE, mind you, but GRACE UPON GRACE. In other words, with our Lord's entrance into the world, we are now the recipients of an ABUNDANCE of grace, an ABUNDANCE of joy, an ABUNDANCE of peace, and an ABUNDANCE of mercy which unlike the wine that was being served at that wedding will NEVER run out and from jars which will NEVER run dry! You see, what makes God "gracious" in the FIRST place is that he comes to us and accepts us JUST AS WE ARE- dirty, selfish, greedy, proud, broken, sorrowful, and afraid where he then ACCEPTS us, FORGIVES us, and COMFORTS us back to health. We can never earn this love; we can never work for his forgiveness- we can only RECEIVE it as he makes it AVAILABLE to us. It come to us FREE and UNCONDITIONAL. And if we step out in faith and accept how through God's Son—Jesus Christ—we have been forgiven and reconciled to himself, then we will immediately begin to see new life replace the old, each of us transformed by the love and grace of God. And when you are able to see and experience such love and acceptance as THAT, then know you have ALREADY joined the wedding party and that the celebration is about to begin. Let us pray...

*Dear friend, whose presence in the house,
Whose gracious word benign,
Could once, at Cana's wedding feast,
Change water into wine,
Come, visit us and when dull work
Grows weary, line on line,
Revive our souls, and let us see
Life's water turned to wine.*

Amen and amen.