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Epiphany 2

January 17, 2016

“The Wedding Sermon at Cana”

(John 2:1-11)

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COLLECT: Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

The most difficult sermon for me to preach is the wedding sermon. One reason is many of those in attendance frankly are not highly motivated to listen. They're there because it's still considered bad form to skip the ceremony and only go for the free buffet and open bar. So, they might be sitting there, but not really tuned in. Maybe they're poking around on their smart phones or surveying the field for a potential date. Meanwhile, the bride and the groom and family members, the stakeholders at a wedding are a tough audience too because of course, they're so distracted by the needs and concerns and hopes for the day.

Outdoor weddings are the hardest of all. It can be blazing hot. Then there are so many more distractions. Ducks landing in the water, gusts of wind blowing the flowers over, a group of Harleys rumbling by, a photographer wandering around, children playing at the feet of the couple, a sound system that is insufficient. At one outdoor wedding, I thought I was well prepared and had pretty good stuff. I went in confidently . . . but it was a spectacular failure. Just a couple minutes in and I had already lost them. They were totally gone. It could have been reading from *Mein Kampf* and nobody would have much known the difference.

Moreover, many of those who attend weddings don't know me. But I'm trying to sell them something, right, and that's always harder when there's no relationship, no trust. In fact many who come to weddings these days have a strong distrust of the church and of clergy and of the message. How do you get past that within the span of a few minutes . . . because a few minutes is all you got! I've often thought that preaching at a wedding is like standing against a wall,

blindfolded, with a cigarette dangling out of the mouth and they're about to fire. But every rifle has a silencer.

As far as I know, Jesus never chose the venue of a wedding to preach. But he did attend one, and of course it was the site of his very first miracle. With this quiet miracle, he reveals much about himself. Turning water into wine he preaches a powerful sermon. At Christmas, I said "Any God who comes to us as a baby intends us no harm, only life." Today, I say, "Any God who turns water into wine, desires our joy, not only in this life, but in the life to come."

Historians say that Jewish weddings at that time lasted seven days. Many guests would remain the whole week, abstaining from work and sharing the family's joy. John tells us Mary was there as well as Jesus and his disciples. There was a lot of eating and drinking, music, laughter, storytelling, toasting and well-wishing, children playing with cousins.

At this particular wedding, they ran out of wine, a major faux pas, disaster even in that culture. The wine is gone, but the guests aren't. It was probably the groom's responsibility, so he is ashamed and embarrassed, his mother frantic, the bride is in tears. Mary, when she sees it unfold turns to her son and says, "You know, it'd be nice if you did something about this."

At first, Jesus demurs. "Woman, what does this have to do with me?" Surely, that stung Mary. But she persists, and tells the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." By the way, those are the last recorded words of Mary in the New Testament. "Do whatever he tells you." That's a good note to leave behind, for sure, but I think there's a cautionary lesson there too.

In any event, "Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons." Jesus has apparently changed his mind about intervening, because he tells the servants: "fill the jars with water" which they do, right to brim. Jesus is making the servants witnesses of what is about to transpire, because they know the jars are full of water. "Now draw some out"

Jesus says, “and take it to the master of the feast.” He’s the caterer. The servants comply, wondering why they’re carrying water to the caterer, but by the time it reaches his lips, it has turned into a very fine wine, so good, in fact, that he makes a crack to the groom about bringing the expensive stuff out now . . . now after the party is well under way and no one will much notice or appreciate the difference.

What happened? That’s our first question. It’s not the right question, but it’s our first question. I’ve always liked C.S. Lewis’s answer. He wrote, “Every year, as part of the natural order, God makes wine. He does so by creating [a plant] that can turn water, soil and sunlight in to a juice which will, under proper conditions, become wine. God is constantly turning water into wine. The miracle at Cana consists in a short cut” (Miracles, p. 141). That’s all . . . not a big deal. No need to stumble and fall on it. God’s ordinary way of making wine is through a lengthy, controlled, predictable process. God’s extraordinary way of making wine happened at Cana.” Wendell Berry wrote, “Whoever has considered 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 . . . is turned into grapes.”

So, Jesus has turned about 150 gallons of water into fine wine. That’s about 750 of our standard bottles, or 62 cases. This celebration will eventually end, but it will not be for lack of wine. Any God who turns that much water into wine is generous. Any God who turns that much water into wine also entrusts us with a lot of responsibility. He trusts that they’ll use good judgment and exercise self-restraint, moderation. He’s very consistent in this way. He did that with creation too, didn’t he? He made this beautiful planet and filled it with resources in the land and in the sea. And then he stepped back and in essence, gave it to us, entrusted it to us, expecting that we’ll use good judgment and exercise self-restraint and take good care of it.

He gives us our spouses too, and trusts that we'll love and respect them, care for and protect them. He entrusts infants and children to our care. Remarkable! They're his really. He made them. He put his name on them in baptism, but hands them over trusting that we'll be slow to anger, like he is, and abounding in steadfast love; trusting that we'll have compassion for them as he does for us; trusting that we'll love them and teach them to know and love him. What remarkable responsibilities he so easily entrusts to us!

150 gallons of wine . . . Not everyone likes this miracle. It's been less than a week since he was baptized by John, who, by the way, wouldn't be caught dead at this party. John's back out in the desert in his loin cloth eating locusts, probably thinking Jesus should be out there too. Some are so scandalized by the miracle that they have suggested it wasn't really wine, only grape juice. But let's think about that for a moment. First, the Greek calls it wine. Second, Jewish weddings always had wine. Third, in the Bible, there's nothing inherently wrong or sinful about wine. It's what we do with it that can make us wrong and sinful. Fourth, just think about the group dynamics here. Imagine your extended family and friends coming together for seven days and nights to celebrate a wedding. Would they be content the whole time to be sipping from Welch's grape juice cartons? Of course it was wine.

So not everyone likes this miracle of Jesus, but if you think about it, their argument is with God's grace. Jesus is giving way too much of the wrong thing to the wrong people. Too much (about 150 gallons) of the wrong thing (fine wine) to the wrong people (folks who have had enough).

Grace always has a scent of scandal to it. The Lord's generosity, whether at Cana or at this baptismal font or at this altar or at the gates of heaven, the Lord's grace always carries with it the scent of scandal. Too much of a good thing to people who don't deserve it.

Notice also how Jesus turns a very human event into a holy occasion. We talk about how secular our culture has

become. The secularism of our culture is not the denial of God. People are still plenty spiritual. But secularism is the insistence that God stay in the places and times we assign him. So for example, it's easy to confess Jesus is Lord in here because it's safe. But it's a lot harder to do that at work, where it's not safe, where Jesus isn't always welcome. We're fine praying before a meal at home, because that's private spirituality, but it's harder to do that at the restaurant, because then you're taking your faith public. It's easy to be faithful and pious here and now, much harder on a Friday night in the frat house

It seems Jesus doesn't know the difference between sacred and secular. We like to keep those two separate and clean, but he is forever mixing them up. Secularism treats God almost like a dog we let out of the kennel once in a while to stretch his legs and then whistle him back in. But with this miracle God refuses the part, and insists all of life is fair game, even a big old wedding reception . . . all of life is the arena of God's activity and love and judgment and grace.

And finally, the dearth of wine at a wedding is a small problem in the grand scheme of things . . . unless you're that groom who's so embarrassed and ashamed. Turns out it wasn't too small a problem for the Lord. He healed Peter's mother-in-law of her fever too. Not a big deal, right . . . unless you happen to be Peter's mother-in-law. What puny problems are you withholding from him? What big problems? Remember, he commands us to pray and promises to listen.

Finally, running short of wine really wasn't his problem, but out of love he made it his problem. Your sin wasn't God's problem. But then out of love for you, God made it his problem and took it all the way to the cross. Why? Because any God who turns 150 gallons of water into wine desires our joy in this life and for the life to come.

Wedding sermons, particularly the ones outside, are a tough business. I've changed my approach. I get in, say a few words mostly about God's grace, and try to get out in one piece. At Cana, Jesus didn't say much either, but he

did make about 150 gallons of good wine. That is generosity. That is grace. That is the only you and I or anyone else for the matter gets into the kingdom: his generosity and grace. “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and manifested his glory, and his disciples believed in him.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

