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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany – January 19, 2025
John 2:1-11

Oh, my... weddings! Weddings are just accidents waiting to happen. They are complicated and lengthy affairs, full of custom, tradition, invested meaning (and money), and an overflow of emotion. Weddings are also filled with humans, and we know what happens when there is a gathering of people... things get messy and go wrong: the groom faints; the four-year-old flower girl suffers stage fright halfway down the aisle and runs screaming from the sanctuary; the best man forgets the rings; the bride steps on her dress and rips out the hem; a great gust of wind blows away the flowered arch.

And that's just the ceremony! Wedding receptions are also roiling hot messes of potential disaster. Someone gets sick at the dinner; the toast goes painfully awry; the cake is knocked over; the DJ's setup trips the breaker, and the power goes out. So many possibilities for catastrophe.

All this, of course, was true in Jesus' time as well. And if we think our modern wedding celebrations are large and complicated affairs, it's nothing compared to what went on those days. A wedding would have been a huge event in the social life of first century Palestine, and the bride and groom celebrated marriage not with a honeymoon away but with a seven-day wedding feast at the groom's home.

For those invited, it would have been a rare respite from the mundane tedium of every-day life. To run out of wine at such an event would signal thoughtlessness and lack of preparation... an almost unforgivable social offense that would surely bring shame upon the groom's family. It is within this context that our gospel lesson this morning takes place.

The story of the Wedding at Cana is the account of Jesus' first miracle and is found only in John's Gospel. John tells this story in a way that is remarkably dreamlike – it is fuzzy on detail and filled with symbolic references. Perhaps this is why John refers to Jesus' action as a sign rather than a miracle.

Signs are symbolic in nature and mysterious, and they always point beyond themselves to hidden truths. Like so much of John's Gospel, this story has what Frederick Buechner describes as a "curious luminousness about it, the quality almost of a dream where every gesture, every detail, suggests the presence of meaning beneath meaning, where people move with a kind of ritual stateliness, faces melting into other faces, voices speaking words of elusive but inexhaustible significance."

This dreamlike story begins "on the third day," which itself is ripe to bursting with meaning as it foreshadows the future act of earth-shaking significance that will also occur on the third day. That day when Jesus will again change sorrow into joy, but then it will be on a cosmic scale. For this story, John describes a wedding feast – a great gathering of community – and yet it is as if the faces of those there remain blurred. We don't really know who's there or what's going on. As often in dreams, we enter the action in the middle – the details and characters undefined – and all we know is that there is a celebration going on with feasting and drinking enjoyed by all.

John tells us that there are six large stone jars standing empty used for ritual cleansing. It is these empty jars that Jesus fills with wine. That there are six of the jars may have symbolic meaning, perhaps suggestive of God's six days of creation. And wine itself is highly symbolic in the biblical tradition, inferring prosperity, abundance, and blessings. The once-empty jars previously used for purification rites will be filled to overflowing with the new wine of incarnational salvation. And lastly, we have Jesus' cryptic words spoken to his mother after she informs him that the wine has run out. With their surprising sharpness and seeming rebuke, they are only to be further shrouded in mystery by his sudden about-face. It is as if this story were playing out in a shifting fog – some parts illuminated and others obscured.

But when the fog of the dream blows away, what becomes clear is the joyful nature of the story. The celebration is at risk – the wine has run out – and Mary is the first to notice. Despite Jesus’ reluctance at this time to reveal how God is working through him, he does, in fact, act. The once-empty jars are now filled with fine wine for the wedding guests, provided by Jesus so that the party can continue. Changing the jars of water into jars flowing over with good wine becomes a metaphor for Jesus’ ministry as he brings new vitality to this ancient religion. As one commentator writes, “Jesus’ face is reflected in the pools of flowing wine being poured out for the laughing, happy wedding guests who are present to celebrate life.”

As we move through this season after the Epiphany, we will encounter a number of stories that reveal the true nature of Jesus. The story of the Wedding at Cana shows us not only that Jesus is absolutely the best wedding guest you could ever have, but also how his incarnational ministry brings about God’s abundance and blessing amid our temporal experience of scarcity.

The image of the wedding banquet is itself a sign of the restoration of Israel and the wine served there as a symbol of the joy and celebration associated with salvation. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the feast that God will prepare for all people, as “a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines... of well-aged wines strained clear.” The abundance of fine wine at the wedding banquet is symbolic of the abundance of joy that awaits not only Israel, but all people on the day of God’s culminating act of salvation.

Jesus’ extravagant sign of changing the water into wine reveals that, in him, life, joy, and salvation have arrived. At the beginning of John’s Gospel, he asserts that “in him was life, and that life was the light of all people.” And later in that same Gospel, Jesus will tell us, “I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly.” Abundant life is more than mere existence or survival, and certainly more than an abundance of material things. Abundant life is to know and be known by the One through whom all life came into being. It is to allow our hearts to be so transformed that we can discern the Holy Spirit moving and active all around us. It is to have an intimate relationship with the One who loves us so much that he doesn’t know how to stop giving.

Sadly, abundant life does not mean a life of ease, comfort, and luxury or even an absence of sorrow and suffering. But, as New Testament scholar Elisabeth Johnson writes, “it does mean that in Jesus we have an abundant, extravagant source of grace to sustain us, grace that is more than sufficient to provide where we fall short and to give us joy even amid sorrow and struggle... Abundant life means that in Christ we are joined to the source of true life, life that is rich and full and eternal, life that neither sorrow, nor suffering, nor death itself can destroy.”

As the first miracle of Jesus, the story of the Wedding at Cana reveals Jesus’ incarnational ministry. And where creation is infused with God’s Spirit, what will be found is the surprising blessing of abundance. With this story, we are invited to trust in God’s generosity...even when we can’t see it and our jars stand empty. Even when we ask and it seems our prayerful request is rebuffed, God responds nonetheless with not only the living water we need for survival in this life, but also the good wine of salvation. Filled now to overflowing, we will surely never run out of this wine of new life.

Amen.