

“The Life of the Party”

A sermon based on John 2:1-11
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
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By David Oliver-Holder

A wedding ceremony as the symbol of God’s grace, as an image of what God wants to happen in the word, as the scene of an epiphany, a revelation of God. It’s almost too much to be believed.

Someone has written that “Weddings are accidents waiting to happen.”ⁱ I have not yet seen, or been part of, a perfect wedding. Bridesmaids forget to bring their dresses. Best men forget to bring the rings. Couples still take the risk of letting the 4-year-old ring bearer carry the actual rings. Musicians forget the music, or come in at the wrong time. The wind blows out unity candles.

I’ve watched as a bridesmaid was escorted into the church barefoot because her shoes would not fit. Couples have tried to memorize lines, only to forget them at the most important moment. Ministers sometimes forget to let the bride and groom know that they can finally kiss one another.

Weddings are accidents waiting to happen. And it’s been happening a very long time. We see one in our Gospel lesson for today from John. In those days, couples did not go on honeymoons. Instead, they and their families and friends all went to the home of the parents of the groom for seven days of feasting and celebrating, and yes, drinking. Wine was an important, and symbolic, part of the festivities.

So here, in John 2, disaster is about to befall the gathering. The wine is just about to run out. The party is just about to come to a screeching halt, and such a thing could not be more scandalous. It all makes you wonder how God could choose such a scene, how Jesus could be roped into revealing God in such a scene.

Are there places that are off limits for the divine? Consider this. Mark records many signs and miracles that Jesus performed. John records only seven. These include the healing of a nobleman’s son, the healing of a man crippled for 38 years, the feeding of a multitude of people, walking on water, the healing of a

man born blind, the catching of a miraculous number of fish, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

These are miraculous acts indeed. But which one does John talk about first? The least impressive one: turning the water into wine. And what is more, he did it at a party of all places.

So when Jesus says elsewhere in John's Gospel that he came that we might have life and have it more abundantly, he meant what he said. Yet, how easy it is for us to wrap ourselves in our sour cloaks of respectability and self-righteousness. One writer has said that in our culture self-righteous indignation has been elevated to a high art. You know what he is talking about if you take the time to read letters to the editor. "Dear Editor, I am greatly offended. When I read your remarks of late, my eyes grew bloodshot with anger and pain. My heart began to race and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. My finger tips went numb as the impact of the offense raced through my being..."

Jesus knew this sentiment well. And with this ministry launching miracle at Cana, he announces that his kingdom will have none of it. Something new is here. It is salvation, a salvation that comes through faith, faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. It is grace, grace that refuses to respect the proprieties.

We do well to remember what Paul wrote. He wrote that it is against the powers and principalities that we struggle. Those are the forces which are so often manifest in the voices of respectability. Those are the forces against which Jesus struggled and which worked to kill and silence him.

Do you remember the story of Peter on the rooftop in Joppa? God was about to call him to take the Gospel to the Centurion Cornelius, a gentile and a hated Roman soldier. But before God could get Peter going on his mission, God had to counter the voices of Peter's upbringing, the voices of his own old-time religion, voices which said that he ought not have anything to do with Gentiles, especially of the Roman soldier persuasion. Don't touch them, don't go into their homes, don't eat with them. For to do any of those things would make him unclean, impure.

So while Peter prayed on that rooftop, God came to him in a vision, showing him all sorts of creatures to eat, telling him, "Rise, Peter. Kill and eat." In the vision Peter responds, "No way, Lord." Can you imagine? He knows that it is the voice of God that is speaking to him. And still he says, "No way."

"No way, Lord. I have never eaten anything profane or unclean." The voices of religious respectability are so strong in Peter that God has to repeat the scene three times before Peter understands. "What God has made clean, you have no right to call profane."

The same sort of respectability reigns today with the same power. It reigns among many with respect to alcohol. For many, this text is an unsettling text, so much so that whole books have been written attempting to argue that Jesus really didn't make wine at Cana.

Alcohol remains the source of so much good religious humor. Years ago, southern writer, Lewis Grizzard, could joke about his amazement that even the Baptists in Georgia were even speaking to each other at the liquor stores. My best friend, who is a Mennonite pastor, says that a good Mennonite will never take just one other Mennonite fishing with him. Why? Because he will drink all of your beer. Why not, when there are no other credible witnesses?

That Jesus turned water into wine should not trouble us. Instead, it should delight us. Even those among us who doubt miracles should not be put off by this one. Wendell Berry has written, "Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence in this warm world within the cold and empty stellar distances 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 Italian astronomer Galileo wrote that, "Wine is sunlight held together by water."

This miracle, this sign, as John calls it, delights because of what it symbolized. John is announcing that in Jesus something better is here. In the Old Covenant between God and Israel, God gave the people water from stones in the

wilderness. Here, Jesus is giving the people wine from stone jars. It is a reality and a symbol at the same time. Here we see the joy and abundance of the kingdom. And we get, as well, a foretaste of the Eucharist, of communion.

So to get hung up on the respectability of alcohol when reading this story is stunning. Doing such causes too many to completely miss the point. John understood the event at Cana as an epiphany. The pivotal verse in this passage is verse 11: "He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him." They saw what others missed. They saw and understood because they remembered what the prophets had said.

The setting of a wedding celebration mirrored the image of the messianic days painted by the prophets. Jesus would later speak of new wine in old wineskins. Here, the disciples see choice wine, wine that is better than the guests had already been drinking.

Isn't that what the prophets foretold? Isn't that what was promised? Amos said that the mountains will run with new wine and the hills will flow with it. Hosea foresaw the day when God's people will make the vine flourish; the wine will be as famous as Lebanon's. And Jeremiah foresaw: "They will come, shouting for joy on the heights of Zion, thronging towards the Lord's lavish gifts, for wheat, new wine and oil, sheep and cattle; they will be like a well-watered garden, they will sorrow no more."

The disciples knew these visions of promise. And here was Jesus making not just any wine, but the best wine. He made not just a flask of it, but 120 gallons! The disciples saw the miracle for what it was: the revelation of God-with-us. And they believed. What better place for all of this to happen than at a wedding banquet?

Such a gospel cannot be threatened by any place. Indeed, there is no place safe from the transforming and redeeming power of the Gospel. Jesus would demonstrate this over and over in his ministry as he took the Good News of salvation to outcast after outcast, to unclean place after unclean place. It is not the Gospel that needs to fear, to fear accidents waiting to happen, to fear our

fallible humanity, to fear soil and water and light It is the powers and principalities that need to tremble, for their doom is sure.

No, John would have us understand that the kingdom can and does break out anywhere and everywhere. It is our culture that would have us keep a place for everything and everything in its place. It is our culture that likes the male separate from the female, the rich separate from the poor, the white separate from the black. It is the voices of respectability that cry out that the conservatives can have nothing to do with the liberals. Only then, they say, can we hope to remain pure.

Let them understand today that none of us are pure. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And let them understand that the love of God is so deep, so strong and so large, the generosity of God is so extravagant, that it cannot be contained by any one place or people. It will ultimately embrace and transform all things.

Until that day, we will have to rest content with epiphanies. So, when the kingdom of Christ does break in among us, don't mind the place or the other guests at the party. Just come on in, make yourself at home, and enjoy the generosity of the one who is the Life of the Party. Amen

ⁱ Robert M. Brearley, Pastoral Perspective on John 2:1-11, in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 260.