



“The Real Miracle”

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.” Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

The story we hear today about the Wedding at Cana has been read in the church on this Sunday in the Epiphany season for a long, long time. The Gospel of John launches Jesus' public ministry with this wedding story of celebration and joy. Changing water into wine is the first time he gives his disciples a real sign of who he is and what he has come to earth to do. The power of God, divine power, is in him, and he needs his disciples to know and come to trust that this astonishing news is true.

In this story, Jesus has come of age. He and 6 of his disciples, together with his mother, Mary, have all been invited to a wedding in Cana. The details are sketchy as to why they were there, just who was getting married, that sort of thing, but then details are not John's main concern in writing this story. John was more wanting to give us a sneak preview of all that is to come, of Jesus and his ministry and more grandly, of God's intent for the redemption of the whole of creation.

A funny thing happens at this wedding. Mary has, since her son's birth, been pondering all kinds of things in her heart through the years of his growing up, and now she seems to sense before he does that it's time to begin. She provokes him to ministry, as one preacher puts it, observing wryly: “They have no wine.”

Now, we could stay on the level of how awful it is to be a bad host and not provide appropriately for one's guests. We could speak of a young couple disappointed that their first real party seems destined to flop. And we could conclude that Jesus is just basically the kind and thoughtful sort of friend who comes to the rescue in a pinch, someone we'd love to know, someone handy to have around to bail us out when we're in a tight spot.

But beyond Jesus wanting to make sure that everyone had a good time and that this marriage got off to a good start, John is using images and symbols and references to show his readers that Jesus is the Messiah. He's using code language, if you will, that would have been easily understood by his readers that may leave us contemporary readers clueless if we don't know what all this is about.

So let me reveal the code for you. All through Scripture, the wedding banquet with free-flowing wine was a symbol of messianic fulfillment. It was a way of saying something like: when the Messiah comes, every day will be this wonderful! It can't get any better than this! When the Messiah comes, everyone will be feasting and rejoicing and exceedingly glad. It will be the biggest party you've ever seen and no one will be left out.

But now remember, if you will, the larger context of this wedding story. A bigger story is being told. It was, yes, a family celebration but it was taking place in the midst of a situation of cruel Roman occupation, terribly dark days. The people were oppressed and suffering. They were on the edge of despair. They were longing for a Messiah to come. They had been praying so long to God to do something, to set them free, to bring justice, to make things right and they had waited so long many wondered if change would ever come, if God had not possibly forgotten about them or given up on them all together. They were just beginning to hope that Jesus might indeed be the Promised One.

Jesus turns the water into wine that day to send a powerful message, not just to the wedding party, but to the whole people. This story is a sign of what God can do. God is still in charge, Jesus' action shows. Jesus does something dramatic to show that God's intention will prevail. What you see here in the moment is not all there is. You may see limitation and disappointment, but God has plans for righteousness and the dawning of a new day.

Five or six hundred liters of water become wine, the finest wine. What an extravagance! This revelation is intended to lead us to into great joy. What happens at Cana is an enactment of the good news of great joy for all the people of which the angels sang at Jesus' birth, a sign that what God has in mind for us, indeed for the whole creation, is a restoration of the bountiful goodness that existed from the beginning of creation. Through Jesus Christ, God wants us to know that indeed we have life and have it abundantly.

Through this weekend and tomorrow, Americans are invited to remember and live into the words and vision of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The United Methodist Church was one of the prominent voices in calling for his birthday to be a national holiday over 30 years ago. The King Center in Atlanta, Georgia, now houses his papers. Through the wonders of

technology, you can go to their website and actually read his notes and sermons in his own hand-writing as he wrote them. In addition to his own sermons, as most preachers do, he copied out and kept a collection of quotes from whatever he was reading, passages that touched him or that he thought might be useful to him along the way.

There's one he titled simply "Miracle." It's a quote from Harry Emerson Fosdick, also a pastor, for many years at the Riverside Church in New York City. In a book entitled "Modern Use of the Bible," Fosdick wrote and Martin King saved these words: "At any rate, if miracle is to have any meaning at all to modern minds I venture it will have to be reinterpreted from its old phrasings into some such terms as this: a miracle is God's use of his own law-abiding powers to work out in ways surprising to us his will for our lives and for the world."

God's use of his own law-abiding powers to work out in ways surprising to us his will for our lives and for the world.

Do not God's ways often surprise us and lift our eyes from the grim reality of the world as it is to what it can be, what God intends it to be, for all God's children? Do not God's ways often reignite the joy in hearts when we are tempted to cynicism and despair? Whenever we're tempted to say "well, that's just the way it is," or "there's nothing I can do about it,"....does not God surprise us with prophets and people and leaders and experiments in faithful generous living that inspire us with new vision and new hope?

Through the Scriptures, God plants this vision in our hearts, this world of divine, extravagant abundance and joy. We've got a long way to go, but that's where we're going. And like Yogi Berra said: "If you don't know where you're going, you might wind up somewhere else."

We're going to the great wedding feast and the choices we make along way, the paths we choose, the paths we reject, the options we invest ourselves in, the things we refuse to condone...all these choices will become much more clear to us if we let God's miracles continue to surprise us with the vision of where we're going.

Martin Luther King talked about the earthly wedding feast, this sign of God's reign, as the beloved community, the world house. He said, way back in 1967: "We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live together with each other in peace." He said: "Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives."

Through the life of this faith community, this congregation, we are living towards the vision of the wedding feast, that time when the fullness of God's love and joy will be showered upon one and all, this qualitative change in our souls and quantitative change in our lives, water turned into wine. We're living it out as we best we can each day, each day moving a little farther on down the road. Because we know where we're going. We know who's leading us. And we expect to be surprised by God's miracles in worship, in service, in prayer, in fellowship, miracles that lift us up and fill our hearts with joy.

That's what the wedding at Cana shows us, this story of celebration and extravagance, this story of generosity and abundance, this story of love overflowing and lives transformed from mere water into wine.

The love and power of Christ Jesus can transform our lives according to God's holy purpose. It can turn what is bitter into something sweet. The power and love of Christ Jesus can turn hatred into understanding and brokenness into reconciliation. It can take the myth of scarcity and transform it into the ripeness of abundance. It can turn hurt into joy and disappointment into celebration. The power of God in Christ Jesus can make all things new and beautiful. Even us. Even this church. Even this nation. And even this crazy world. And if that isn't a miracle, I don't know what is.

Alleluia! Amen.