

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

January 17, 2016

Jesus: The Life of the Party

Dear Friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Almost every wedding has its embarrassing or traumatic moments. Mine was no exception. Matthew and I were dirt poor when we were married. We were both seminary students, literally living on student loans and a couple of odd jobs. We had to budget very carefully for everything. So we had our wedding and our reception at church. We couldn't afford a DJ but wanted a nice reception, so we hosted the reception ourselves. We couldn't serve alcohol at the church so we served sparkling grape juice. After dinner, we played a few fun games with our guests and because we were the entertainment, we each only took a bite or two of food. We were both relieved when the reception was over and cherish the memory of splitting a burger later because we were so hungry!

Almost every pastor has stories of moments at weddings that are sort of unforgettable. A pastor friend of mine tells of the occasion when the secretary decided to save some time on the wedding bulletin. The previous wedding had been for Tom and Mary. This one was for Jim and Gretchen. The secretary took the old bulletin, did a Find and Replace search and replaced the old names with the new ones and ouila! She had a new bulletin for this second couple. It worked great until the congregation came to the creed where the bulletin said, "I believe in Jesus Christ..... Born of the virgin Gretchen."

In the Gospel text for today we encounter a situation where a wedding couple was about to be very embarrassed. They were in the middle of the wedding feast, and they ran out of wine. That might not seem like a very big problem to you, but it would have been a disaster for that bride and groom.

Weddings were a big deal in those first-century Jewish villages. People who were getting married were expected to have a big party where they entertained the community. And these parties didn't last for hours, they lasted for a week. This young couple, who had run out of wine in the middle of their wedding feast, had a real problem. Not only would it be embarrassing for the moment, but people would remember it for years. In fact, fifty years later, people would say, "Oh yes, Samuel and Priscilla. They ran out of wine at their wedding!"

How could such a thing happen? Perhaps they were poor folks and could only afford X amount. Or it could be that they failed to estimate adequately how much they would need. No matter what the reason, the wine gave out, and a joyous wedding was on the verge of turning into a disaster.

In today's Gospel reading, Mary, the mother of Jesus, says to Jesus, "They have no wine." You can almost feel the tension, the panic in her voice. The caterer hasn't arrived. The flowers are the wrong color. The soloist has laryngitis. Why Jesus' mother would be the one who raised this concern has been the subject of much speculation and has given rise to at least one person's theory that this might have been Jesus' wedding. The truth is that we don't know who the Bride and Groom are at this wedding. But we do know that it is Mary who says, "They have no wine," and it is Jesus that she says it to, mother to son, with the clear implication that she expected him to do something about it.

A female colleague of mine says that she has a recurring bad dream about a wedding in which she is standing before a couple and it is time to give the homily and she doesn't have any notes, she doesn't have the liturgy, and she doesn't even know the names of the people. Yikes. I'll admit that this would not be a very fun situation to be in.

Weddings are often stressful. Families don't always get along with one another. Family issues that once seemed resolved seem to come out of hiding. And even if everyone gets along beautifully, it can be a real challenge to deal with the pressure that results from pinterest and the gazillions of cute decorating ideas that exist. And then after all of that you have the mother of the bride... and who knows what you get there. This is where Lorri Holt, our wedding coordinator, is extremely important and helpful. Somehow she knows how to make everyone happy, how to calm all of the nerves, and how to make everything go smoothly.

The wedding couple in today's gospel reading really could have used a Lorri Holt. "They have no wine." That was what Mary said to Jesus, and you can almost hear the tone with which she said it. This isn't the sweet virgin pondering something in her heart. This is more like a panicky crazy stressed-out-wedding-woman - There is no wine! Oy vey, What're we going to do?

Like all the stories in this Gospel, this one is full of symbolism. Right from the very beginning when the writer announces that it was "on the third day" that there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, but giving no point of reference (third day after what?), readers immediately think of that other "third day," the third day after Good Friday, when Jesus rose from the grave. And when Jesus answers his mother in what sounds like a bit of a testy response saying, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come," we wonder what hour he

means, but we soon realize that it is his crucifixion. That is his hour! And then there are the six stone water jars used for the Jewish ritual of purification. Jesus tells the servants to fill these with water, and then to draw some out and take it to the chief steward. And when they do, the water has turned to wine. What is the symbolism of the six stone jars? Is the writer of this gospel making some kind of point here about formal ritual being replaced by the miraculous wine of the Spirit? Those are the sorts of connections one must always be on the lookout for in the Gospel of John.

But on another level, just Jesus' presence at this event says something. "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." It was a party, and there was wine, so we know it would have been a happy, rollicking time. Jesus is often portrayed in art, movies, literature and sermons as such a somber and serious figure that it is hard to imagine such a person ever being invited, much less attending such a gathering. What bride would want that person attending her wedding? I'll admit that sometimes I think it's hard for wedding couples to invite the most holy pastor to their wedding for fear of ruining the party. So can you imagine inviting Jesus? But Jesus was invited and he attended. Yes, Jesus was at this party. And not only did he attend, but as the story suggests, he saved the day. He kept the party going. He was the life of the party.

In some ways, this is a bit of a strange miracle for Jesus. So many of Jesus' miracles in the Gospels are about desperate human need -- the blind receive their sight, the deaf hear again, demons are cast out, hungry multitudes are fed, a terrifying storm on the lake is stilled. But the story of the wedding at Cana is in a class all by itself. No one is dying or in need of healing. No one is suffering. To the contrary, everyone is having a good time. There is music and dancing and feasting, and wine is flowing freely. The result of the miracle is merely that the wine continues to flow. This party is back in action.

The one who begins his ministry by turning water into wine at a wedding is giving us an epiphany - a vision, a glimpse - an AHA moment - a clue about what God is like and what kind of new realm is being inaugurated.

This is no God who cautiously measures who will be loved and who will be unloved among us; who shall be blessed and who shall be cursed among us. This is no God who judiciously decides who will be declared pure and who will be declared impure among us. This is no God who carefully calculates who is deserving and undeserving among us. This is no God who painstakingly legislates with whom we shall worship, and with whom we shall eat and with whom we shall socialize and who we shall marry. This is no God who keeps the best wine away from us.

This is a God who delights in lavishing goodness and love and tenderness and mercy upon the hungriest and the thirstiest and the dirtiest among us; upon the most isolated and most alienated of us, upon and the most distressed and the most depressed of us, upon the loneliest and the sickest and the saddest among us, upon the most timid and the most fearful and the most hostile among us, upon the most ignorant and most intelligent and most arrogant of us; upon the most prudish and most careful and the most cautious among us, upon the most hypocritical and the most narrow and the most judgmental of us.

Our God is a God who turns a hundred and eighty gallons of water into wine so we can live abundantly and love extravagantly! This is a story to empower us to see that no matter how empty life seems to be the Spirit can fill us to overflowing with new life, new energy and a new joy.

That's what Jesus is like. Jesus' love is extravagant. It's a celebration. It's overflowing with joy. It's a party!

May each of us on this day celebrate and rejoice in God's amazing love for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.