

“Party Fouls and Party Tricks”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
John 2:1-11
January 21, 2018 -Third Sunday after Epiphany

I have been to a lot of wedding celebrations. I’ve been to gaudy New Jersey receptions and elegant Southern soirees and church basement bashes in Minnesota with Swedish meatballs. Unless you’re in the wedding party, the details of all these festivities start to fade into one long Chicken Dance. The truly memorable weddings for the guests are the ones where something goes a little bit awry. The best man makes a fool of himself with a misguided toast. Or Aunt Gretchen decides that Uncle Leonard is Patrick Swayze to her Jennifer Grey on the dance floor.

There was one wedding I remember that was near a lakeshore, so the bride and groom had decided to make their grand departure from the reception in a canoe. They had canoe paddles with bows on them, and her veil blew in the breeze as they climbed in. They paddled slowly, so the pictures would come out, and dozens of their friends and family walked out to the end of the dock to throw birdseed and wave and cheer. It was a lot more people than usually stood on that dock. Just as the couple got about thirty feet out, there was a loud creak and a bang and the dock collapsed into the lake. Thankfully, nobody was hurt. Everyone just got wet and laughed. The newlyweds heard the ruckus and stopped. But someone hollered “everyone’s okay!” and so Amber and I just kept paddling.

But in all the weddings I’ve attended as a guest, been in the bridal party for, or officiated, one particular problem has never come up. I’ve never seen a wedding reception run out of alcohol.

I thought about that this week as grocery store shelves were emptied on Tuesday in preparation for winter weather. I spoke to Emma, our resident Scot, on Wednesday, and she asked, “What do Americans do with all that bread and milk? Pringles are two-for-one, people!” I thought about those of you who were home with kids, cooped up for days in a row, and I wondered what would happen if you ran out of cookies or goldfish crackers or hot chocolate or cartoons or video games or, yes, wine. I thought about it for a good minute, and then I shuddered and tried to think about anything else. But that desperation — that panic — of running out of what is needed to keep the good times rolling, that is a feeling we need to hold onto to understand this story from John.

A wedding in those days in those parts was a BYOW affair. There was no *Bed, Bath, and Beyond* at which to buy the couple a salad spinner, and the Cana catering options were limited. So you brought wine with you to the wedding to help make merry. And so when Mary sees that the wine has run out, it is a bit of an urgent problem. This is a breach. The party will slow down. People will notice. There is a lack. This is embarrassing. And so Mary tells Jesus, “They have no wine. Do something.”

And he resists. He is hesitant. “Mom, that’s not my problem.” And I imagine she gave him the look only a mother of the lamb of God could give, saying, “You can fix this.” “Mom, my hour has not yet come,” he replies.

Perhaps Jesus doesn’t want this to be his first great sign. In the Gospel of John, we don’t get “miracles,” we get “signs.” More on that in a second, but over the course of the rest of this gospel he will walk on water and heal the sick and feed a huge crowd from a picnic basket and raise a guy from the dead. Compared to those,

restocking the bar at a wedding doesn't feel like a real sign.¹ This isn't the way they're supposed to find out. This isn't life or death. This isn't a challenge to the established order. This isn't the Sermon on the Mount. This isn't changing hearts or lifting up the lowly. This isn't soul stuff. Turning water into wine? This is a party trick. It's not holy.

Mary's response to Jesus's assertion that his hour has not yet come is to turn to the help and say, "Do whatever he tells you."

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Mrs. Jackson was angry with me. She had come to Chicago from the suburbs to have a bone marrow transplant to give her the best shot the doctors could come up with for her to survive. And I had promised her that I would be there tomorrow to pray over the cells as they came out of the cooler and went up on the IV pole for infusion. But now I was begging off, asking if I could come and pray an hour beforehand, because some meeting had popped up right at the time of the scheduled transplant. I explained to her that there was no magic about the timing of the prayer and, after all, I wasn't really a pastor yet. She told me that I should do what I needed, but that if I wanted to pray early, I might as well just pray now and not even have to come back tomorrow.

I hurriedly told her I'd be back in the morning and would figure something out. Then I went to my supervisor and complained about how Mrs. Jackson doesn't get it, *I'm not even ordained*. And he took a deep breath and said, "She wants you there. I think she just ordained you."

At the close of worship, we're going to talk budget stuff and we're going to celebrate a great year of ministry at Edgewood. Every time I've stepped into this pulpit the past few months, I've noticed this feeling — that we are nearing a turning point in this congregation. We have found solid footing after a couple years of transition and we are growing. You are going to hear that 2017 was the most solid financial year this church has seen in awhile. There have been losses and challenges and you all have rolled with the punches faithfully in that uniquely EPC way. I can't put my finger on it, but my growing sense is that God is up to *something* here and we all are more prepared than we know for it. My prayer is that we will be courageous and curious about what's next for us. Our temptation is to say: "Things are good. We're comfortable and content. God may be up to something, but not quite yet. Our hour has not yet come."

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Turning water into wine was not the sign Jesus had in mind. But it wasn't just a party trick and it is so very holy. It is an act of sheer beauty. It is an act of mercy. It is freedom from shame for the hosts. It is an act of restoration. It is joy and celebration and it is declaring that the party must go on.

Yes, Jesus, your hour has come. You are needed, right now, right here. *Do whatever he tells you*.

And so we get the sign. He tells them to fill the six jars — jars normally used for water for purification rites — and they fill those jars right up to where they're almost overflowing. And then he tells them to draw some out and take it to the chief steward and the steward declares it to be the good wine. And his glory is revealed and his disciples know and believe because this sign is not a party trick. It's not about keeping everyone liquored up.

¹ Maryann McKibben Dana, "The Hour Has Come," <http://theblueroomblog.org/the-hour-has-come-a-sermon-for-next-church/>

It's not about "where three or four are gathered, there shall always be a fifth." It's not about the wine or the jars. It's not about the *what*.

Last week I asked a worshiper to hold onto the question Jesus asked his first disciples. I asked her to hold onto it all the way through to Lent and on to Easter. The question was "What are you looking for?" Jesus will spend the Gospel of John showing those who follow him that it's not what, but whom. He will tell them the who of the matter, and he will show them signs that point to him, just as John the Baptist did.

In this first sign that points to him, we see that there is no lack, there is abundance. There is no shame, there is joy. There is no running out, there is grace upon grace — gallons and gallons of grace. And in this sign, the kitchen staff knows, but their boss doesn't. The guest at the meal is the one who provides. The best wine is kept until the end. And if you start to say, "Well, that's all topsy-turvy!" the composer of this gospel will point and say, "Now you're getting it!"

Speaking of topsy-turvy, toward the end of this Gospel we hear:

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth.

Mary will be with him at the cross and there will be wine. But that is not the end of who this is. The celebration will prevail — the party must go on, grace upon grace. Somehow, love wins out, as people continue to form relationships and take the risk of loving other people, trusting that there is abundance, not a lack. And God continues to trust that relationship with us is worth it. And we continue to gather with water and with wine to seek abundant grace from our God, at the same time surprised when we see a sign that shows us that we are needed and beloved. We see our cups overflow with grace, and just when we think we've had our share and that God can't possibly love us more, God rolls up God's holy sleeves and says, "You think that's something? Hold my wine." Amen.