

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 17, 2016
Second Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 62:1-5
Psalm 96
I Corinthians 12:1-11
John 2:1-11

Of the numerous reasons why people in today's society are hostile to Christianity, one of those reasons has to be the images of God and of Christ that such folks carry with them in their minds.

Often those images are of a God who is harsh, legalistic, and judgmental. Sometimes they are images that reflect the frailties and weaknesses of our human parents, which we then project onto God.

But of all the images we could choose to portray the God of Christianity, perhaps none is as real or as accurate as the image we have of Jesus enjoying himself at a wedding celebration. And I cannot help but wonder: *How many people might be drawn to the Christian faith if their primary image of God was this picture of Jesus at this wedding, laughing and dancing and singing and celebrating?*

It may come as a shock to us, but Jesus enjoyed a good party. Weddings in Jesus' day often lasted 7 days or more, and I can assure you that the time was not all spent in exchanging vows and listening to sermons! The time was spent in

eating, drinking, dancing, and celebrating. I have no doubt that such was the case here in the little village of Cana, a few miles outside of Jerusalem.

In fact, as I tried to picture the celebration in my mind this week, I thought of Jesus and his mother and his disciples dancing Jewish dances reminiscent of something you'd see in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Here at Cana, people are having a good time, and Jesus is among them. Jesus is not merely the eternal Word made flesh; he is flesh for whom it is ok to eat, drink, and be merry.

It's no wonder then that images of wedding feasts such as this one loom large in Scripture as metaphors for God's kingdom. Our OT lesson from Isaiah this morning is one among many in the Old Testament, and the Gospels are also filled with such images (cf. Mt. 22:2-14; Mt. 25:1-13; Lk. 14:16-24). In the book of Revelation John portrays the consummation of history in chapter 19, and of all the images he could have used, the image he chooses is the image of a wedding feast.

John also tells us at the end of his gospel that Jesus did so many other "signs" or miracles that they cannot even be numbered. And yet, the FIRST of all those miracles was at a *wedding*. That seems significant to me. Of all the images we could have of the God of Christianity, perhaps none is more significant than the image of Jesus here at this wedding -- laughing, singing, dancing, enjoying himself and enjoying the company of others.

Almost five years ago when a group of us from Epworth went on pilgrimage to England and toured some of the amazing cathedrals, I remember one session where an expert spoke to us about the stained glass windows in the churches, and the wonderful story they tell.

But unless I'm mistaken, there is no stained glass window anywhere that depicts Jesus and his friends and family celebrating at the wedding at Cana in Galilee. That, to me, is most unfortunate. It is a glaring omission from the story, and someone like Carolyn Gilbert should be commissioned to do a window that depicts this celebration at Cana. For of all the images we could hold in our minds to convey the God of Christian faith, perhaps none is more significant than Jesus eating, drinking, dancing, celebrating on this day.

For those of you who have ever taken the catechism, you will remember well the very first question you learned to answer. The question is: What is the chief end of man? And the answer is: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

The notion that our purpose in life is to glorify and enjoy God is wonderful. But have you ever considered that the reverse may also be true. Have you ever stopped to think that God's purpose in creating you was *so that God could enjoy you, and enjoy your company*? If you find that hard to believe, then I encourage you to revisit this wedding celebration at Cana.

But this text is about much more than Jesus merely enjoying himself at a wedding reception. It's about what happens *during* the celebration. In the midst of the celebration, the wine runs out. In the midst of the festivities, resources become inadequate.

Jesus' mother is intimately aware of the situation, and she mentions it to him. But her mentioning it to him seems in reality a veiled request for him to do something to fix it, a "fix" that would require extraordinary or even miraculous action.

Jesus says to her, "how does this concern you and me? My time has not yet come." This phrase is used nine times in John, and each time it refers to Jesus' death and resurrection. It's as if Jesus is saying to her, "look, I'm just starting my ministry. I wasn't planning on doing any miracles today, especially in a setting like this."

And it's not explicit in the text, but in my mind's eye I can hear Jesus' mother saying: "Look, son, I'm not asking you to end world hunger, or to bring world peace, or even carry the weight of the world's sin on your shoulders today.

I'm just asking you to give these people TODAY a foretaste of the Father's limitless and inexhaustible supply that is coming SOMEDAY. I'm just asking you

to show us that the Father's kingdom that will one day come in its fullness is also here RIGHT NOW in the ordinary moments of our lives because of you."

If that is what Jesus' mother is asking of Jesus, we can certainly identify with the sentiment. As a nation, as families, and as individuals, many reached the place in 2015 where the wine ran out and the celebration stopped.

Life continues to throw us unimaginable challenges.

[Dirk's friend Bryan's sister; Cindy's sister; Sonia's granddaughter]

People are struggling. Some of *us* are struggling. Some of us are at a place where we need a miracle. And the miracle we need is not the "happily ever after" or "everything is made better forever" variety. We just want to see a sign that the kingdom that is one day coming in its fullness is also present RIGHT NOW, in the midst of our pain and anxiety.

We aren't necessarily asking for world peace, or an end to hunger, though those things would be nice. *What most of us are asking for today is just a little wine at the wedding.* We need a sign from Jesus to show us that when we reach the end of our meager resources, God's full giving is only begun. We need a sign to help us believe that *Christmas is truly real* – that God is truly *with* us.

This, I believe, is what Jesus' mother wanted for the folks at the wedding celebration. Just a little foretaste NOW of the way things truly ARE and WILL BE.

And so she says to the servants, “Do whatever my son tells you.”

And the text tells us that the servants fill the stone water pots full of water, take it to the wedding coordinator, and when it reaches him it has become wine. And it’s not just a cheap house Merlot. It’s the good stuff. The best stuff.

What struck me this week was the way that Jesus reverses the typical pattern of starting with the good wine, and ending with the more inferior wine.

I find in this action of Jesus a promise to us that means a great deal to me as I find myself getting older. The promise is simply this: *God saves the best for last.*

I’m at a stage of my life where I’ve started to mourn the passage of earlier stages. The simplicity of childhood is long gone.

The wonders of adolescence have long since faded.

The freedom and adventure of college days is long since over.

The ambitions of young adulthood have now become regrets over goals I failed to achieve or accomplishments I did not reach.

The demands of parenthood are changing. My parents are aging, and I frequently find myself telling my wife, “I’m getting old.”

And if I’m not careful, I find myself walking down the dry, parched road of nostalgia, torturing myself over past mistakes, and wondering what might have been.

But by God's grace, I cannot travel that road for very long before I find myself on the outskirts of a small village named Cana. In the distance I can hear people laughing, singing, dancing, and having a great time. As I get closer I'm able to see and recognize friendly faces -- *your* faces!

And then I hear the clinking of stemware on glass, and someone says: "I'd like to propose a toast: to Jesus, who keeps on surprising and blessing us with new wine that is sweeter and tastier than anything that has come before!"

And another chimes in: "To Jesus, who saves the best for last, and who comes to us when times are hard and shows us that our best days are still out ahead of us!"

And another: "To Jesus, who not only loves us, but *likes* us, and created us so that he might enjoy our company!"

And still another: "To Jesus, whose grace and blessing in our lives overflows to the brim, in times and places where we least expect it."

And another voice: "To Jesus, whose love for us not only takes him to a Cross, but also to our weddings and funerals."

As we come to the table this morning, the bread and the wine are promises to you that no matter where you've been and what has happened to you, God's best blessings are still out ahead of you. No matter what you've been through, and

regardless of your limitations, God's sweetest and best work is still taking shape in your life.

So come with faith. Bring your dancing shoes if you want. And celebrate with me the God who always saves the best for last.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.