

January 16, 2022

Epiphany 2

John 2:1-11

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“Vows” is what the section is called. You may have seen it in the Sunday NY Times. It features couples of all ages and the story that led up to their love, engagement, and marriage. Most of them are plucked from obscurity because the story is intriguing, although well-known people like Gov. Polis and his husband are also occasionally profiled. Most often, it also includes a picture, a description of the wedding itself, what was worn by the couple, where it was, and who officiated.

The editors have a lot of fun with the headlines, you can tell: *His Love for Her Could Fill a Book. Instead, he Wrote a Post; They Shared a Cab Ride, Then Life Together;* and *A Master of the Half Pipe Plants His Feet at the Altar.*

Descriptions of wedding receptions are also included, although, as you can imagine, most have been scaled back in the last two years. But there are still some with food and drinks for hundreds, choreographed dances by the couple, elephants, and fireworks.

An elaborate wedding reception is where we find ourselves this morning. So often we think of the world of Jesus as a simple place, with people who struggled to get by. Some of that is absolutely true, but it’s also true that there were political and social complexities, and expectations for behavior and hospitality that are unfamiliar to us and the way we live in the 21st century.

If you’ve ever planned or paid for a wedding, you know that “simple” very rarely describes what happens! The same was true for couples and parents in Jesus’ day. There was no down-on-one-knee proposal complete with tears and video. Rather, there were negotiations between the parents, sometimes when children were younger. Negotiating a marriage involved payment of animals, household goods, and maybe land from one family to the other. Then the betrothal, which could last

many months; and finally the actual wedding. That celebration (paid for by the groom's family) was expected to last not just one evening, but 7 days! Food and drink, places to sleep and entertainment had to be provided for all of the guests--to do less would make people question your hospitality.

It sounds like a burden, doesn't it? But it was also a joy, we have to imagine--a family reunion on a grand scale celebrating a new chapter together. Mary knows all of this, all the background, all the expectation, all the joy--when she edges herself next to Jesus and whispers "They have no wine." No wine. The host couldn't just say "Party's over!" and turn out the lights. That would bring shame on the family, and as some of you know, small communities have long memories. Don't you think, too, that shame was something Mary knew quite a bit about; and she wanted this family to not feel its sharp sting?

So often people both inside and outside the church have the mistaken belief that Jesus is the greatest police officer, exactly what we need in the world and in our lives. Keeping track of wrongs, laser focused on your sin; tamping down any enthusiasm, pride or joy because God is *serious business*. So serious for some folks that they are sure that Jesus' main work is to draw circles and lines to mark who is in and who is out. Maybe you were taught that too, in your family or in a church.

If we read the Gospels, those characterizations ring hollow. Jesus spent time celebrating at dinners with his friends, and his enemies. He said the Kingdom of God was like a banquet to which everyone receives an invitation, and like a shepherd who brings a lost sheep home with joy. And on every line that was drawn, Jesus used the eraser of God's love and grace. Because of all of this, St. Paul could write "Rejoice in the Lord always!"

Our own pattern of Sunday worship echoes this--we receive the gift of forgiveness at the start, and the rest is praise and thanks and sharing a meal with Christ and hearing again the promise of Jesus' love and constant presence.

Maybe you don't feel very joyful today, and that's ok. After all, the last almost two years have been grim and hard to bear, and we are all experiencing the despair of

that finish line moving farther and farther ahead; and there is so much else that we each carry today, personally and as people living in a broken world. And yet, this Gospel--the whole of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, carries the promise that 2020, 2021, sorrow, suffering, and scarcity will never be the last word, for you, for me, for the whole world.

“Do what he tells you,” Mary says. And Jesus makes *way too much* wine: 180 gallons; the jars filled to the brim with wine of the very best quality, something that makes even the steward sit up and take notice. The celebration and the joy continue. *In* Jesus, *with* Jesus, love and grace will overflow on everyone.

John's Gospel makes the point that this is just the beginning, the first sign of many that Jesus accomplishes. In this first sign of who he is, Jesus shows us how the story (how our story) will always end when he gets involved: not with shame or sorrow, but with joy, abundance, and surprise.