

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

January 24, 2010 Third Sunday after Epiphany

John 2:1-11

The Miracle of Abundance

One of our favorite shows on TV is America's Funniest Home Videos. Especially the clips from weddings – usually involving fainting grooms, bridesmaids' dresses on fire or the antics of much-too-young ring bearers and flower girls.

You'd think that having been a pastor for more than 16 years, I'd have some pretty good stories of crazy things that have happened at weddings – but I really don't have any of note. The best I could come with was the bride who was so drunk she barely made it down the aisle – thankfully the aisle in the Acton church is not very long.

Some of you probably have stories from weddings you've been to throughout the years. But I doubt any of us have a story that can match what happened at Cana 2,000 years ago!

Weddings and feasts loom large in the Bible as metaphors for God's kingdom. Isaiah compares Israel's future joy to a wedding celebration: "as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5). The psalmist for this week describes a feast of abundance for both "man and beast, both high and low" (36:7–8).

Jesus compares God's kingdom to "a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son" (Matthew 22:1–14, Luke 14:16–24). Then there is the parable of the ten bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1–13). And in Luke, we're told that life in God's kingdom mirrors wedding etiquette: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited" (Luke 14:8). And then at the very end of things, John (not the same as the Gospel of John) imagines a great wedding feast when he gets a vision of the end of human history (Revelation 19).

But back to our story for today. Imagine an elaborate wedding feast – one that would last for 7 days (which was Jewish tradition at the time). So they're on day 3 or 4 and embarrassment of all embarrassments, the wine ran out. The bar is closed and the band is just warming up. They're still a good two hours away from the Macarena, which requires a bit of wine to do!

And Jesus, newly baptized, looks around and sees 6 water jars. But not just and water jars. These were used for Jewish purification rituals – and they were big. 20-30 gallons each. The size of our trash barrels.

Think about it – water that was used for purification before high holy celebrations and feasts. (This happens right before the Passover.) Water with which they physically washed – remember, sanitation in the ancient world was not what it is now with Purell on every counter everywhere – but water which also symbolized a spiritual cleansing. And Jesus turns that water into wine.

Now for us – and for the people John was writing for – when we hear wine in church, we think of... Communion. And in communion we think of Jesus. So, if water that is for purification is now wine – the message for those (like us) who read this knowing the WHOLE of Jesus life, death and resurrection – the message now is that Jesus is the one who purifies us.

The symbolism of this all is rich! And while there are a lot of gaps in the narrative of the story, (Whose wedding was this? How did the servants carry ALL that water from the town well back to the party? Why were they taking orders from Jesus anyway?) there are also a lot of details which have a lot to teach us about Jesus.

Remember we are in the season of Epiphany, when the emphasis is on Jesus being revealed to us, discovering who he is, glimpsing the Glory of God come to earth in this person.

So the servants do as Jesus asked, they fetch the water. Jesus has them take it to the head caterer, who tastes it – and who knows what he was expecting... And whoa! It is GOOD WINE. 120 gallons of it!

And he has no idea where this wine has come from – all he knows is that they ran out of Gallo and now they're serving Chateau Lafite.

But, you know who does know? The servants!

While the party rages on, while the caterers are filling plates and glasses, while the dancers move in shifts from joyful frenzy to collapsing rest, while the young boys and girls begin to notice each other from the safety of their friends and under the watchful eye of their parents, the servants glimpse the glory of God!

The wine steward, the wedding couple, the groom's family (who are hosting the wedding – again, Jewish custom), and the wedding guests get good wine – and those of us who like wine can appreciate the miracle which took place.

But the servants, the ones who go unnoticed, whose job it is to make sure everyone else has a good time and is satisfied – the servants get more than just good wine – they get Jesus, his power and in his power his glory revealed to them – which is even better than the best wine!

And you know these servants will tell their friends and through the network of house help in Cana, word of who Jesus is will spread.

“We have seen his glory,” we read on Christmas Eve – words which appear just a chapter earlier in John.

When I was young I thought that if you were able to go back in time to meet Jesus and the apostles they would have had visible haloes around them, as they did in the pictures I saw in books. I later learned that this was the way artists show “glory” in art. And glory meant a person's honor and reputation.

The glory of the Lord was understood to be visible, a kind of radiance that surrounded God and was reflected in God's messengers the angels, and even in those who came close to God. So for example Moses was surrounded by a glow when he came down from Mt. Sinai. Jesus himself is referred to as the glory of God in the book of Hebrews where it says that, “He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.” (Hebrews 1:3)

But there is more to glory than the visible. Glory is a power that makes things happen. In John's Gospel glory means both the “radiant brightness” of God and the “powerful activity” of God.

And in John, revelation – that is, God revealing himself as Jesus and Jesus revealing himself as God – is actually a rather ordinary thing. All through this gospel, ordinary people discover the power that Jesus has. From tax collectors and thieves, to women and servants, power and glory are revealed.

And what does this glory look like? Really look like – besides gold leaf halos and starbursts in Renaissance art? I can tell you exactly what it looks like in 2 words – Abundant Life! From the miracle at Cana to the miracle at the Cross and everything in between, Jesus says “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly!”

Our God is a God of excess. From manna in the wilderness to the loaves and fishes. From the forgiveness to the grace. From water to wine to abundant life – we get it all!

The old adage, “everything in moderation” does not apply here!

Do you remember the 1987 film *Babette's Feast*, which won an Academy Award for best foreign film? The story takes place in the late nineteenth century in a small fishing village on the dank and dreary coast of Denmark. Two sisters have given up their own ambitions to care for their father, an elderly pastor of a stern and tiny church.

Then a French refugee named Babette arrives and things begin to change in their small world. Babette wins the lottery and decides to spend it all (10,000 francs) on an extravagant dinner for 12, which the sisters host in honor of their deceased father and pastor. What the villagers don't know is that before Babette had come to their village she had been a famous chef in Paris

And so she cooks the villagers a sumptuous feast. At first the uptight villagers can't allow themselves to enjoy such extravagance. In fact they had made a pact beforehand not to express any enjoyment at the meal. But as the meal progresses and the wine is consumed they loosen up and learn to accept celebration, excess, and abundance.

It is a modern parable of the grace of God. Here's an even more modern story.

A colleague of mine tells of going to her first church – a typical UCC New England church on the green – tall white steeple – old bedraggled building, tired around the edges, falling into disrepair here and there – and the people, their spirits at least, resembled the building.

I don't remember the details of the story, but I remember this much. Somehow either she or someone suggested they start using the good china every week at coffee hour, including the silver tea service. And they asked people to serve each week who knew all about formal tea services and such.

And they cleaned up the elegant parlor and started having gatherings and meetings in there rather than in the cold, sterile classrooms. They started having parties, at first they'd have them for a reason – a Christmas party, or whatever. Then they started having parties for NO reason.

And as the weeks, turned into months, turned into years – new life was breathed into their little congregation. Their life together was characterized by a spirit of joy and celebration. All the while they had been blessed but didn't seem to know it. All that time they had had around them

all the signs and symbols of abundance, which they now enjoyed and shared with others, rather than keep them on the shelf in a cupboard behind a lock.

It's all about God's glory and who sees it. Sometimes it's right before our eyes and yet we miss it. In Jesus Christ life is totally transformed and yet existence goes on as before. Nothing is changed and everything is changed for those who believe and do as Jesus says. And remember, whatever Jesus transforms, he transforms completely and abundantly.

Sure, the groom and the bride are saved from embarrassment, but more importantly, this behind-the-scenes miracle is the first "sign" that Jesus is the Son of God come in human flesh.

It'd be nice if we were having communion today, but we're not. Still we'll sing a communion hymn, about what it means to have Jesus in our lives, the power of his purifying grace and strength.

It's enough to make you want to have a party. So break out the good china, serve the best wine first, clean up the place. Our physical lives ought to reflect the abundant grace of God.

Come, eat, drink and be merry – whether you need a party or not – the party is happening and you are invited.

Amen.