

Joy: The Serious Business of Heaven
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
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Rev. John Cleghorn

Text: John 2:1-11

You never quite know what's going to happen at a wedding. There must be some kind of reverse corollary that applies to weddings. The more they are planned, the more likely it is that something unexpected will happen. Most of the time, it's something fairly small. Frequently, it adds a dash of humor that cuts the stress felt by nervous brides, grooms and their families. But not all of the time.

Just ask our wedding mavens here at Caldwell, Ann Alford, Eloise Hicks and Carol Williams. They could tell you about the time that the wedding planners got so caught up sending the adorable, toddler-sized flower girls down the aisle that they completely forgot they had left the bride in the holding room until after the service was underway.

Then there was the time the bride asked our wedding coordinators to "fluff up" our pew cushions for her guests. We could do that, she was advised. But our 30-year old cushions would release so much dust we would have to call in the Environmental Protection Agency.

Recently, I had the privilege of doing an outdoor wedding in one of our city's most beautiful natural gardens. The bride had picked out a lovely Shakespeare sonnet to be read. The mother of the groom had told her husband to make sure the family's aging dog had been locked in the house. But the groom's father had a different idea of who should attend the wedding. When no one was looking, he secretly slipped the old hound out the screen door.

At the appropriate moment in the service, I read the Bard's well-known lines about the steadfast nature of true love. Shakespeare wrote that love . . .

*"... is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark...."¹*

At that moment I felt something brush up against my leg. I looked down and noticed the dignified German short-haired pointer standing beside me, calmly surveying the wedding guests. Wandering bark, indeed.

The second chapter of the Gospel of John gives us a wedding story to top them all. Jesus attends a wedding. The family runs out of wine for the guests. Mary asks Jesus to

¹ Sonnet 116

help. “Do something, anything,” she seems to say. Being a good son, he does, turning water into wine.

As memorable as this story is, however, it may strike as, well, a bit “off.” We can feel tension between Jesus and Mary over whether this is the right time or circumstance for a Jesus miracle, or “sign” as John calls them. What’s more, the stakes just don’t seem that important. So the wedding guests go without some wine, we may think, big deal. It’s not as if Jesus must act to heal or save or resurrect someone in the name and for the very sake of God’s kingdom.

We also pick up on some undertones concerning Jesus’ identity as the Son of God. He doesn’t want to attract attention on this day. Mary, however, thinks nothing of it. The steward remains clueless about the miracle. He seems more concerned with social protocol, this business about serving the good wine first. But the servants get it, and keep the secret to themselves.

It’s a head-scratcher, this rare, out-of-place seeming snapshot of Jesus’ social life. On one level, this story is about who Jesus was and is. John gives us some clues to tell us that much.

Let’s start with those six stone jars full of water. We should remember that houses then, of course, had no running water. We should also remember that cleanliness was vitally important to ancient Judaism. So, for religious and practical reasons, having water around was part of life. Given the story as it’s told, we can safely assume it was for the guests to wash their hands before the wedding banquet.

So far, so good. The story makes sense, at least in a purely functional and logical sense. But function turns to extravagance when Jesus turns the water into wine. Not just average wine, but the best and richest of all the grapes and vineyards.

The wine steward can’t make sense of it. Not only does Jesus’ quick action save his job and professional reputation, but it goes way beyond what would have been a satisfactory solution. Signs and miracles notwithstanding, one or two jars would have provided, say, one more glass for each guest, perhaps for the parting toast. Then, the host family could have their guests out the door and saved face. Instead, it seems, Jesus wants to start the celebration all over again.

Maybe this story is about more than a wedding. Maybe it is about more than just a chemical transformation of some water. Maybe it is about God’s extravagant grace, far more than we could ever deserve, ask or imagine. Maybe it is about the transformation God offers us in Christ. Maybe it is about seeing the world with new eyes as a place, where, because of Christ, we can celebrate. We can know joy.

To be clear, when I say joy, I am not speaking of a mood. Moods fade and shift. Such is our human condition. That’s where the metaphor of the wedding celebration has some

limits. God did not come in Christ simply to add an hour or two to the party and then send us home unchanged so we could wake up the next day and face whatever trials and tribulations we left there.

With grace even more extravagant than seven jars of fine wine, our Lord offers us joy deeper and more steadfast than the passing of pleasure or momentary happiness. It is the unwavering acceptance of a God who knows our sins and faults and failures.

This joy does not deny our grief and our mourning. It does not ignore our anxieties. It does not gloss over the difficulties we face, day to day, even hour to hour. It does not pretend this world isn't broken and full of disappointment. No, once it is ours, it rests comfortably in our soul, unchanged by temporal triumphs or tragedies.

To be clear about another aspect of this joy, it can and should coexist with whatever urgency we feel about changing what we can change. Joy does not mean we simply slap a "Happy Face" sticker on our world's real crises, inequities and injustices.

Last week, author and speaker Tim Wise came to town to speak to several events about the truly hard work of race relations. In part because he is a straight, white, educated, middle-class man, he can get away with saying things that might cause problems for a minority voice. So he is not afraid to say them with urgency and some sting. He gets heard that way, whereas a minority voice saying the same things might be dismissed as a whiner or attacked as a troublemaker.

Speaking at a Mecklenburg Ministries event, for example, he pointed out how we have gotten comfortable with the label of "underprivileged" to describe those who may be poor, less educated, less advantaged to achieve in America. It has, he said, become a polite way to get around talking about our society's failures in education, in healthcare (physical, mental and otherwise), in the marketplace, in government and elsewhere.

Wise also pointed out how we as a society never seem to use what logic would suggest is the opposite idea of being "under-privileged." That's a word you can find in any dictionary. But we're not as comfortable with talking about how some may be "over-privileged." That's not in any dictionary, he said, perhaps in part because we may not want to confront the implications. He has a point.

Tim Wise came to Charlotte to provoke us, if nothing else. On this weekend when we recommit to Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream, on this race relations Sunday in the Presbyterian Church (USA) I, for one, hope there will be more to show for his visit than just temporary provocation.

But, friends, hear me when I say that none of that means we need to forsake the joy available to us in Christ. Living into our primary identities as God's beloved doesn't mean we have to hang our heads and give up on God because the world around us –

maybe even the world inside us – can be a profoundly difficult and disappointing place to be.

It may mean we have to hold joy and our Christian calling to serve in a kind of tension, taking both equally seriously. It may mean that the very joy we have should fuel our action to be the hands and feet of Christ, even when we can't solve all of the world's problems by next Tuesday. Indeed, breathing in the joy of being God's beloved can keep us going when we don't solve all of the world's problems by next Tuesday, which is more than likely to be the case.

Several of us from Caldwell met with Tom Currie last week. Tom is the dean of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Charlotte. He had invited our help in working with the seminary to design a program for Latino church leaders. It's an exciting idea and I was privileged to present our team of people who know so much about -- and bring so much passion to -- Latino outreach ministry.

Tom Currie basks in the joy of being God's forgiven child. But you'd never know it. He rarely smiles when he teaches and preaches. He often twists his face, clinches his eyes shut and runs his tense fingers through his white hair. But he never stops seeking to serve God's purposes.

As far as appearances and mannerisms go, many things about Tom seem conservative and buttoned down. But Tom Currie knows the irrational, irresponsible joy and peace that spring from God's grace. Tom lives – and shows others how to live – by the words of his favorite theologian Karl Barth, who wrote that “we are invited and summoned to take seriously the victory of God's glory in this man Jesus and to be joyful in him.”²

“... take seriously the victory of God's glory in this man Jesus and to be joyful in him.”

Sometimes, friends, we can take ourselves so seriously that we don't take that victory seriously enough. I will be the first to claim that sin. Whoever wants to join me can line up behind me.

But God forbid – literally, God forbid – that we ever diminish what is possible in Christ by thinking too much of what is possible through us. Ironically, that very realization and the liberation it presents can be the source of joy that is real and true, authentic and lasting.

Perhaps that is what the author and theologian C.S. Lewis meant when he wrote that “Joy is the serious business of Heaven.”³

. . . . Food for some serious – but ever-joyful thought – on this second Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

² Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 123 (as quoted by T. Currie in *The Joy of Ministry*, p. 35)

³ *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*

“O Happy Day.”

Amen.