

“Keep It Flowing”

August 30, 2020

Old School: Party Time series – Holy Communion – Livestream

Weddings...something usually **does not** go according to plan. If you're a guest, you may never know it, but I've been a part of enough weddings to know it's true. A beloved family member is running late for the ceremony. The bride or groom is really nervous and feels faint, so you have a chair close by just in case. The microphone picks up the blowing wind at an outside wedding. The weather doesn't cooperate up north on a ski hill in October – so cold. The ring doesn't slide on the ring finger easily. The marriage license has a typo – or your pastor forgets to sign the copy and you get a call from the clerk's office. The cupcakes are left uncovered at the venue, and ants find them. Or, like this wedding at Cana, the wine runs out.

Jesus is smack-dab in the middle of a wedding crisis. His mom is there. His disciples are there. A lot of people are there because it's a wedding. Not a wedding day – but literally wedding **days** – even up to a week of people coming and going and celebrating and drinking and eating – and drinking. Weddings were a bright spot of joy for people who worked hard and lived in poverty. It was time to celebrate, so that's what people did. And now the wine is gone!

Weddings are still important celebrations – a marriage and new life for two people. Yes, we're happy for the couple. But, let's be honest, we like the festivities – food, drink, dancing, the atmosphere.

I've been privileged to officiate at a lot of weddings over 20 years, and I want to share some pictures today.

SHOW SLIDE – Mary's wedding in Aug. 2019

My oldest niece, who was born on my 18th birthday and whose name is Mary, got married last year to a wonderful man named Derek. I officiated the ceremony, which was a privilege and a blessing.

And then we had a party. There was good food and drink and lots of dancing. One of my favorite memories is of my oldest sister, Anne, dancing all night long to music she loved and literally having a wonderful time of celebration. She was so happy, and it was a joy to witness!

SHOW SLIDE This other picture is my cousin, Paul, and his wife, Jamie. He and I grew up together. We don't see each other often enough, but it was wonderful to spend time with him and other family. I officiated Paul and Jamie's wedding early years ago.

Weddings are important celebrations for family and community. They literally bring together people – sometimes reconnecting or meeting for the first time. Looking back on that day, especially after family losses in this past year, it was special.

Weddings, then and now, are celebrations. We celebrate God's love in our lives through Jesus Christ. We also celebrate that God's love is embodied in us. It's hard to remember that amid planning and preparing, but it's the spiritual grounding. We come together to celebrate God's love and faithfulness to us and to witness promises of love and faithfulness between two people. As witnesses, we're also there to offer support. It is a time of great joy and celebration! And Jesus' presence and power at this wedding certainly brings joy, especially because his work helps avert disaster when the wine is gone.

Wine was essential for Jewish celebrations. To run out would mean humiliation, especially because hospitality was a hallmark of Jewish culture. If the wine ran out, the couple and their families would have failed to show hospitality to their guests. If the wine ran out, the party was over!

At every wedding I officiate, I say these words: "With His presence and power, Jesus graced a wedding at Cana of Galilee, and in his sacrificial love gave us the example between two people..." It's always a reminder to me of Jesus' full humanity. He was human. He lived in human situations.

He wasn't separated from the world, but was intimately involved in it. He had social connections, which is a part of the mystery and wonder of the Incarnation of God – that Jesus comes to be with us, like us, among us, and yes, even celebrates with us! He didn't live apart from people, but participated in everyday activities and - YES! - probably enjoyed himself. And just like us, he encounters the disasters and difficulties.

Maybe it'd be easier to accept if there was a logical, ordered explanation for Jesus turning water into wine, but there really isn't one. All we know is that Jesus takes a large amount of water, between 120-180 gallons, and turns it into wine. We know that it's a picture of extravagant abundance – over the top – good wine and a lot of it!

The transformation of the water into wine tells us something about what Jesus offers us, too. The water Jesus used was there for ceremonial washing – first, for people to wash their feet as they entered the house and, second, for them to wash their hands. This practice of washing was vital, and if you didn't do it, there was the threat of you being "unclean." That brought isolation. Jesus takes water that was used to ward off a spiritual threat and transforms it into wine that was a symbol of life and joy. He is changing the game! Jesus' work is another revelation of the new covenant he ushers in – the Kingdom of God.

We shouldn't be surprised. God is about the business of making the extraordinary out of the ordinary. God is about going beyond our expectations. Even today, we have our own struggles. The world around us does, too – fighting a virus, seeking justice for all people, including victims of brutality and violence, reaching out to help those who are struggling financially, responding to natural disasters, and just so much pain and grief. Whatever the situation, this encounter is about God breaking in and bringing transformation as we accept grace that is for us and for all people – undeserved, unearned, unconditional love.

I talked to Rabbi Alan Alpert this week about the importance of celebration, especially about the Jewish festivals we focused on last week. He said this about the rhythm of the festivals: "We can feel it in our bones." He said that those holy days "keep us together as a Jewish community" and remind us of our particular religious history and rituals and that God is Creator of the universe.

Celebrations keep us grounded in what's important. They keep us going and connect us to God and each other. They remind us of God's presence and care. Celebrations remind us that time is holy, and that God is holy. That's a part of this wedding celebration, too.

Signs and wonders are God's business. They are a part of life for us, but we struggle to claim them, which is why sharing our God moments is so important. Did anyone see the rainbow yesterday? It was stunning! Lots of people shared it - a witness to the work of God in our midst.

But sometimes we're slow to claim God's presence and power. Don't think for a minute that it was different for people in Jesus' time! They wanted to rationalize it, too. The master of ceremonies who gets the first taste of good wine wants to explain what happened. He thinks the groom saved the good wine for later. He doesn't know the whole story, but the servants and disciples do. They know what happened, and they believe in Jesus because of the miracle. They believe he is from God. They see God's glory revealed, and they take it for what it is.

One writer says, "God does not want our religion to be too holy to be happy in." God is the One who cares about wedding parties, makes new wine – and more wine. God wants the celebration to continue – for the love and laughter and dancing and singing to keep going, for grace to keep flowing in the midst of the celebration.

Maybe there are times when we feel like there's nothing to celebrate – no reason to celebrate. Our spirits are sapped and tired. Perhaps you've felt like that over the past few months. I have. And yet when I read this account about Jesus' first miracle that happens at a community celebration, this moment when God is revealed through simple

things like water and wine, I remember that God is powerful and empowering. God is leading the way into something new, and it's only possible by God's grace.

That's what we celebrate as we come to the table. We receive God's grace. That doesn't mean that we sit back and watch. God is calling us to follow – to be a part of God's movement of grace, of love and joy, of hope, to pray for and work for justice, righteousness, and peace, to stand with Jesus who is always on the side of the one who is hurting and crying and in deep pain. As we come to the table and receive this meal – this sign of grace – may we keep God's grace flowing freely. Thanks be to God! Amen.

PRAYERS of CONFESSION and WORDS of ASSURANCE

Holy Lord, God of life, hear our silent confessions today and our prayer:

Forgive us when we forget that you were a part of daily life, and you know how it is to be human – to celebrate, to dance, to enjoy a meal, to laugh. Forgive us when we forget that you also know the struggles – when we follow paths that do not lead to life, but lead to violence, hate, fear, dread and even death. Forgive us when we forget that you offer life – new life, abundant and eternal, full of hope and joy. Forgive us, help us to turn around and walk again with you. Let your love and grace flow over us and the world.

We pray in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.