St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church

Isaiah 62: 1-5

Psalm 36:5-10

1 Corinthians 12: 1-11

John 2: 1-11

Sign of Joy

There’s nothing like a good wedding. A few hundred years from now, when people look back at the rituals and customs in the world of ancient 2022, they may talk about how the people, even in the midst of the global plague at that time, still took time for special events: religious holidays, weddings and funerals, still took place regardless of the safety barriers, even when relegated to lesser proportions. With biblical intensity, perhaps they will study the way things used to be in the ancient marriage preparation and ceremony, the customs and rituals during the 2022 era. The advanced planning and coordination, the flowers, the cake, the music, the dancing, the food and drink, the photography, the dress, the special thought-out venue, the crowds of well-wishers gathered round, and above all the all-pervading, unspoken, collective recognition that here is another opportunity for love to conquer all. For this couple, no matter what bends in the road they will yet need to face down, there is a universal longing that this love….this marriage, will be a beacon of beauty in a weary world, aching for more lightness of being and joie de vivre. There’s just nothing like a good wedding.

As we look back over a couple of thousand years, it’s easy to understand that people have always felt the same way. The wedding in Cana, appears to adhere to the wedding customs of the day. As was the custom, in lieu of a honeymoon, the wedding couple entered into a seven day wedding feast, hosted at the home of the groom, and as the mother of two sons, I am relieved that this particular ritual has faded away over the course of two thousand years!

It seems clear, then, that for a seven-day festival of eating, drinking, conviviality and just plain good times, would require just as much planning as does a wedding today, whether it be in bare feet in the middle of a field, come one come all, or in a church of choice, with a well-planned mixture of invited guests.

Either way, as with any anticipated event, large or small, Murphy’s Law will undoubtedly be in effect, and this is especially true at a wedding. The first of Murphy’ three laws states that anything that can go wrong will go wrong, and we can all probably recall an event that we, ourselves have planned, or have attended, where for all the good planning, something didn’t work out as well as was intended. Since time began, and since events such as weddings emerged, so it is. And so it was at the wedding of Cana.

Here we are at the home of the groom, the font of hospitality for days to come, and the wine gives out in the midst of it all.

The mother of Jesus, and we note, John does not call Mary by her name, becomes aware of the approaching disaster and she urgently nudges Jesus, also an invited guest, as he sits, quite contentedly, off to the side, probably enjoying the party atmosphere. Mary takes charge of the situation by informing Jesus, who doesn’t initially feel he should be involved. Clearly, Mary knows he can do something about it, yet Jesus is unsure if this is an appropriate time for him to reveal his divine identity. In fact, he’s not even sure if they should be involved at all, addressing his mother as “woman,” a very common and typical address from a grown man to his mother, which sounds a bit offensive to us, but not to the people of his time. All this being said, the expression does indicate his distancing from his mother in terms of what she can or can not tell him to do.

Like any good mother, Mary leaves the decision and solution to him, and merely tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do. She and Jesus must have been an influential guests for the servants to accept her words and Jesus’ directions, and it is clear that she is first to recognize a genuine human need, hence her prompt to Jesus. It is this human need that propelled Jesus to perform his first miracle before all present with the eyes to see and the taste to know that all was good and well. For the rest, including the steward, only rational explanations exist. He only realizes that superior wine is now being served. He doesn’t know its source has come from Jesus. The host, he thinks, has brought out a considerable amount of superior wine, a puzzling move, but very welcome.

The steward is, in a way, much like us. The miracle of turning water into wine would probably have been as difficult for him to understand as it would be for us to notice good gifts, miraculous gifts without thinking that the source of their seemingly miraculous presence has anything to do with God. But these kinds of things are not the purpose for miracles or signs revealed by Jesus. Rather, signs are arrows pointing beyond what we deem as rational or understandable, toward that which is being revealed *through* the signs and miracles.

Jesus enters into his ministry, by performing the first sign to his disciples, to all who were there that day, and to us, of his divine call. It is an understated sign, but significant and miraculous. “Fill the jars with water,” Jesus said,” ….draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” The jars are huge and produced over 120 gallons of wine to keep the week-long festival supplied with the fruit of the vine. And so it was that now it is the best wine that is served, it is the best wine that will keep the joy and laughter going.

The steward is amazed, while the servants, on the other hand, saw what happened and the disciples enter into a new era in their relationship with Jesus. They believe. The wedding continues on to it’s happy conclusion, the joyous feast has been saved and all present are filled with a sense of extravagant abundance for the entire occasion.

It is the first of many signs that Jesus will reveal and one to which we, as Christ’s church, should pay closer attention. Here is a scene which finds Jesus, a guest at a wedding, saying “yes” to joy. He turns water into wine….the mundane into the celebratory, directing us from the start to the one who created all with the intent for pleasure and gladness. God did not create in order to summon sadness, but joy.

Somehow, over the passing of the centuries, the Church strayed from astonished and joy-filled awe to a place where too often, religion becomes just a Sunday sort of thing. Too frequently, and for many, according to Presbyterian author, James McBride Dabbs[[1]](#footnote-1) back in the ‘60’s, “Religion was a day and a place: religion was Sunday and the church: almost everything else was life…….it came around every week, but it didn’t seem to have much to do with the rest of life, that is, with life.”

I like to think we’ve loosened up a bit since the 60’s, but Jesus’ sign at the wedding in Cana establishes with certainty, that God delights in all creation and puts joy into the heart of it all, and that Jesus thinks that any event during which we celebrate people is worth turning the mundane into the celebratory, in whatever way we can find to reveal it.

God never intended that God’s people would take joy out of piety, religion and ritual, whether public or private. Jesus exemplified this intent in the way he moved through his ministry. Faith does not require misery, just the opposite. Everywhere Jesus traveled, he lifted up and celebrated people as they moved through the triumphs and tragedies of life. He celebrated people being married, and he continued celebrating: healing people from their various ailments, physical or mental, freeing them from the demons that haunt humankind within. He loved sharing meals with people and carried a sense of celebration with him, teaching of God’s call for peace and joyful awareness of God’s mercy, It is this joyful awareness that is at the heart of the story of Cana. It is a sign to us that, as recipients of God’s grace, we can rejoice and bring that joy into the world as a sign handed down to us from that day in Cana. Ours is not a religion of somber puritanism, it is a celebration of something miraculous, it is born of hearts filled with joy and awe at the powerful grace and mercy of God.

We are called to celebrate whenever and however we can. We are called to throw parties, real or metaphorical that bring food, flowers, music and joyous celebration into an atmosphere of radical welcome, well-being and love for all those who have need of it. If we forget how to do that, we just have to look back to Jesus at Cana, to be reminded how to live fully and richly in our lives, and how to celebrate our faith joyfully in the service of the One we call Lord.

It is our legacy. It is a gift for the good times and for the hard times. It is a gift for what we are going through now. It is a reminder to find joy in God’s blessings wherever we choose to notice them. Even through the rough terrain of this pandemic, we are called to find joy in the thoughts of each other. Take a moment to stop each day and recall the people in your life, and take joy in their existence, for they are beautifully and fearfully made. Rain or shine, take a look at Creation and give thanks for its complexity and realize that you are made to be part of it, and that it recognizes you as vital to it’s own joyful presence.

The miracle of celebration in Cana reminds us that, throughout all the wars, plagues and disasters, large and small, throughout the lives of the ages, we are all human with the capacity to celebrate our ways through it. That is our strength. That is our armor. That is our survival. To turn our attention to the banquet of life and all it offers, It’s easy to see all that is bad and seemingly hopeless in the world, and we must be aware of all that. But Jesus is pointing us to a new perspective a new way of viewing the world, especially when the world is difficult, that offers hope and an opportunity to find a kind of peaceful celebration in living and joyous faith in a God who is celebrating with us.

We are liberated through God from fear: of life and of death. We are a redeemed people, and therefore we are called to be a celebratory people. Imagine how quickly God’s Church would regrow if the world noticed how filled with joy and hospitality all Christians seem to be. What is their secret, the world might ask, and how do we find some of that joy!

The wedding at Cana was a quiet first sign of Jesus’ amazing, life-changing ministry, and yet it was a major miracle because it magnified, and still magnifies, God’s glorious desire for God’s people to be a living celebration of God’s Creation. Murphy’s Second Law states that nothing is as easy as it looks. Faced with so many great unknowns as we are, it is easy for us to feel strong primal human emotions of anxiety, guilt, anger and compassion, confusion and opinion, leading us to ask what is it we can possibly do to alleviate the pain in the world today, While it may not look easy, and may seem just to darn hard to try, we have learned another lesson from Jesus today. Jesus decided that coming out of obscurity for the benefit of all was what was expected of him at the time. Doing what we do with what we’ve got to do it with, no matter how little we have, no matter how much.

Murphy’s third law says everything takes longer than you think it will, from watching the kettle boil, to waiting for the time when people across the globe can be together again, mask free, to hug and kiss, to eat and drink together, to gather with wild abandon with the people we love.

Well, let’s wait it out, knowing that Jesus is prepared to turn our water into wine for as long as we need it. Let us live with joyous love for each other, no matter how much we all hate our masks, no matter how much we have to be apart, no matter how much we fear in the world, or how great our challenges. Jesus paved the way and now it is ours to turn water into wine, wherever and whenever we notice, as did the mother of Jesus, that it is time to overcome whatever impending darkness awaits, by the simple pleasure of living in a world created by God for our benefit, with celebration and an extravagant abundance of joy for all.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

January 16, 2022

1. James McBride Dabbs, *The Road Home (*Philadelphia Christian Education Press, 1960.), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)