

Rev. Kathleen McShane
July 20, 2014

“Life Is Like a Wedding Banquet!”
John 2:1-11

It is good to finally be here. For at least four months, I have known I was coming to Campbell. You have known my name for about the same length of time. For even longer than that—many months—you have been without a regular pastor. And I want to say to you, “Congratulations.” You have done well, through this time of grief and uncertainty. You have not just survived; you have come together and held something important in your own hands, without the leader you had depended on. You might be saying, “What choice did we have?” but in fact, I think the way you have done these 5-1/2 months says a lot about who this church is, and about the strength of our foundation for the future.

While I haven’t been here on a Sunday before today, I have been here during the week since the first of July, and already I’ve had a chance to see some true heroes among you—people who have stood up in this time in some extraordinary ways. They deserve all of our thanks—not only today, but in the weeks and months ahead. And maybe you’re someone who hasn’t done that work yourself; but you are here. You are here because you knew that there is something solid at the core of this place, and because *this is your church*. It is.

As I stand here this morning, I have some of those anxieties that I suspect every new pastor must have. I wonder if you will notice anything other than my “other-ness”, my unfamiliarity with the ways you are used to doing things. I hope that the traditions we share as Christians and as United Methodists, and our commitment to the future of this ministry in Campbell will be enough to get us through a period of adjustment while we learn to know each other and love each other.

You know, every change, chosen or not, offers a new beginning. This one is filled, as all beginnings are, with both opportunity and challenge; hopefulness mixed with a little bit of fear. And so it seemed particularly appropriate to use as the text for this sermon the *beginning* of the story of Jesus’ ministry, his first miracle, at least as John told the story in the Bible.

The other Gospel writers—Mark, Matthew, Luke--mentioned other things first when they were trying to communicate who Jesus was for them. It’s not surprising that each of them remembered and retold the story of Jesus’ life differently; that always happens when we share our memories with other people who were there with us. But John--who was the clearest of the four Gospel writers about Jesus being the very presence of God on earth—John chose to begin his story with a miracle that Jesus did at a wedding in a town called Cana.

Jesus was there with his mother. We know that because she is a speaking character in this story. So—maybe a family wedding? A cousin, or a family friend, perhaps someone that Jesus had grown up with? We don't know; but here's what we do know about weddings—then and now. They are occasions of great joy, full of music and dancing, and friends and family, flowers and food and drink. Whatever squabbles or reservations about one another family members have, they put them all away for a wedding. Everybody's energy goes into making this a perfect day for the bride and groom; and because the guests are willing to put aside their own stuff, it turns out most of the time that it's a great day for everyone!

Weddings seem to be a universal human ritual. In every culture, weddings are occasions for big gatherings. Our joy in them is whole-hearted. And why not? What could be more life-affirming and hopeful than one person's commitment to be a faithful and constant presence in someone else's life, even beyond the foreseeable future? That's kind of how I feel about today, and the promises, you and I made to one another at the beginning of this service. We can't know the future, of course. But on this day, we promise to give this relationship our best, and to treat it as a permanent fixture in our lives. Whenever we make that kind of commitment, it's a 'yes' moment in life, and it feels solid and hopeful—not only to the people who make that promise, but to the people who watch us.

Back to Cana. We can imagine lots of frivolity going on at this wedding where Jesus and his family were guests; and it goes on late into the night, when the caterer notices that they are running out of wine. Oh-oh. A disappointment, but not necessarily a catastrophe...most hosts probably would have just let the party wind down and said good-night as the guests drifted off toward home.

But Mary, Jesus' mother notices, and she pulls Jesus aside, away from all the dancers, and says to him, "They have no wine;" thereby demonstrating two character traits that are universally and timelessly true of mothers. First, she has this deep internal need to make things right for other people. She is not the host of this wedding. Theoretically the wine shortage is not her problem, but somehow she feels responsible. Secondly, she has unlimited confidence in her son. Who does she think he is, and why does she think *he* can do anything about the wine situation? I can just imagine Jesus looking back at her with that look that mothers are accustomed to seeing from their children when they ask them to show off, that look that says, "Mom, stop—you're embarrassing me!" But Mary is unstoppable, and she goes right on and tells the servants to do whatever Jesus asks them.

So maybe Jesus rolls his eyes once more, but then he looks around and sees six stone jars—big ones, that hold 20 or 30 gallons each—jars that are not intended for wine at all, but for water to wash people's hands and feet in a culture where people wear sandals while they walk on dusty roads. So that's maybe 150 gallons all together, when the jars are filled up. *150 gallons*. Think about how many milk cartons *that* is.

Suddenly, all that water is wine. And it's not just any wine. It's the finest wine they've tasted all night. Enough to go around, and around, and around again. Enough so that this

wedding banquet can go on for several more hours. Enough to make it a party that no one will ever forget.

What makes the memory of this wedding so important that John puts it first in his story? By making it the first miracle Jesus does, it becomes the tone-setting image of his ministry. It's sort of Jesus' coming-out story. John is saying, "This is what you have to know about Jesus before you hear anything else." And then, to make it even clearer that this is a story with significance, to *underline* how important it is to understanding who Jesus is, John begins the story with those words that have always, always signaled something important to Christians: "*On the third day...*" On the third day after Jesus' baptism, he turned water into wine. On the third day after Jesus' death, he rose. It's like a little bit of code. And it means, *Pay attention: this is what resurrection—new life, life in the kingdom of God—looks like.*

John was really clear that Jesus was the very coming of God into this world. And so, he was saying with this miracle story: The kingdom of God is like a wedding banquet. When the presence of God is with you, among you, it will feel to you like good wine—joy--flows endlessly, like you are surrounded by family and friends, like you are celebrating something very special. Like nothing else matters more than being there with your whole heart, your whole attention.

And indeed, this miracle, like everything Jesus told them about the kingdom of God, is about abundance, maybe even excess. There was enough wine not just for another glass, but to bathe in. There was not just enough bread to feed the hungry crowds who followed Jesus, but enough so that there were 12 baskets left over. A tiny mustard seed grows not just into a plant, but a tree so big that all of the birds can make a nest in it. God's people were to look for a land *flowing* with milk and honey. This is the banquet that God invites us to. This is the wedding that *everyone* is invited to, no conditions, no exclusions. This is the life that Jesus came to show us.

And it's the life we seek to live, and to share. Every time we gather around this communion table we share the memory that Jesus turns ordinary bread and juice into more than enough nourishment to sustain our souls. Every time we gather, we share the hope—the trust--that God can still take our ridiculously ordinary, sometimes sad and discouraged lives, and turn us into instruments of holiness and love.

I believe this with my whole heart. Honestly, it's why I do ministry, why I have given my life to this work: because I have had enough hard experiences in my life to test the truth of God's promise to bring new life out of death—losses and disappointments that felt for a while like they might crush me. Some of those experiences were disappointments in my work, and some of them have been even more significant. Just like you, I have lost along the way some people and relationships that mattered very much to me. But every time, *every time*, I have found that just when I was sure the wine had run out for good—that the joy, the aliveness, the security I had counted on for the good in my life was gone—somehow there was more. That it came from a source I had

not ever imagined might yield something so good. A plain jug of water turned somehow, unexplainably, into a fountain of new hope, of fine wine.

I believe it because I have seen this not only in my life, but in the lives of others. The loss of a child that seemed to drain every ounce of hope out of a parent, and then turned him toward a life of purpose, an inexhaustible commitment to fight the disease that took from him something precious. A cancer survivor who made meaning out of an awful experience by walking alongside of others who were going through the same thing. An alcoholic who found that when she honestly told the story of her struggles, she made the kind of connections she'd been looking for her whole life.

This is not about talking ourselves into muscling up and making lemonade out of lemons. If it were, we'd be better off watching Tony Robbins videos than doing the hard work of being the church. We are Christians: people who believe, who *know*, that God is present in the world—*with us, in us, now*--making new life out of death, delightful wine out of ordinary water. We come together, here, to tell the stories that remind us this is true. We gather around this table to take that presence into our bodies, over and over again, hoping that eventually we will become what we eat. We gather in community to offer one another the courage we need to go out and do our work, which is to make more and more of the world look like that wedding banquet, where every person is welcome, and loved, honored and safe.

Church is where we experience for ourselves, and where we practice, what it looks like to live in the kingdom of God, where life holds the whole-hearted joy of a wedding banquet. What we do here ought to have the feel of a party to which every living thing has been invited, no matter the differences between us, or how poor, or un-able, or worn out, or unattractive, or even skeptical we are. Let this be a place where the wine of hope never runs out.

In a way, today you and I are not just guests; we are like the participants—the bride and groom—in the marriage we are celebrating. We are just starting on a journey together. We have made promises to love and support one another. To make, together, a church that lives out the fullness of its calling to transform the world. A good marriage has the power to be far more than the sum of its parts. That's what I hope for in this marriage: that we have been brought together for the turning of water into wine, for the wedding banquet that celebrates God's lavish, extravagant presence and love in this place.