

## ***When You Have a Wedding...***

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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**John 2:1-11** (Bill's own translation, adapted from the Message paraphrase.)

*"...there was a wedding in the village of Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there. Jesus and his disciples were (there) also. When they started running low on wine at the wedding banquet, Jesus' mother told him, "They're just about out of wine."*

<sup>4</sup> *Jesus said, "Is that any of my business, Mother? This isn't my time."*

<sup>5</sup> *She went ahead anyway, telling the servants, "Whatever he tells you, do it."*

<sup>6-7</sup> *Six stoneware water pots were there, used by the Jews for ritual washings. Each held twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus ordered the servants, "Fill the pots with water." And they filled them to the brim.*

<sup>8</sup> *"Now fill your pitchers and take them to the host," Jesus said, and they did.*

<sup>9-10</sup> *When the host tasted the water that had become wine (he didn't know what had just happened but the servants, of course, knew), he called out to the bridegroom, "Everybody I know begins with his finest wines, and after the guests have had their fill, brings in the cheap stuff. But you've saved the best till now!"*

<sup>11</sup> *This act in Cana of Galilee was the first sign Jesus gave, the first glimpse of his glory. And his disciples believed in him.*

A wedding feast. In Jesus' day, there were no Bridezillas or \$100,000 wedding extravaganzas. But a wedding was still a BIG DEAL. Most of the people were poor, with little opportunity to party, so for a wedding they went all out.

William Barclay described it this way. "The wedding festivities lasted far more than one day. The wedding ceremony itself took place late in the evening, after a feast. After the ceremony, the young couple (was) conducted to their new home. By that time, it was dark and they were conducted through the village streets by the light of flaming torches and with a canopy over their heads. They were taken by as long a route as possible so that as many people as possible would have the opportunity to wish them well. But a newly married couple did not go away for their honeymoon; they stayed at home; and for a week, they kept open house. They wore crowns and dressed in their bridal robes. They were treated like a king and queen, were actually addressed as king and queen, and their word was law. In a life where there was much poverty and constant hard work, this week of festivity and joy was one of the supreme occasions..."

For a Jewish feast, wine was essential. ‘Without wine,’ said the Rabbis, ‘there is no joy.’ It was not that people were drunken, but in the East, wine was an essential. Drunkenness was in fact a great disgrace, and they actually drank their wine in a mixture composed of two parts of wine to three parts of water. At any time the failure of provisions would have been a problem, for hospitality in the East is a sacred duty; but for the provisions to fail at a wedding would be a terrible humiliation for the bride and bridegroom.” (William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible Series, The Gospel of John, volume 1*, pp. 96-97)

So this is the background. Jesus has been invited to this wedding. Some traditions suggest that the wedding was of one of his cousins. At any rate, he is there at the wedding reception. Not only is *he* there, but he has brought his first five disciples with him. Some commentators suggest that this is why the wine ran short: five uninvited guests. Jesus’ mother, Mary, seems to have had some sort of responsibility in this occasion. And she tells Jesus that the wine has run out. He replies, “Mommmmm, it’s not yet my time.” Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus is very much in charge, and very aware of God’s timing for things in his life.

But Mary is undeterred. I’m guessing Mary gave Jesus “the look,” the “Jewish mother look.” Then she says to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Jesus tells the servants to fill the pots used for washing. For this wedding reception there were no fewer than six large water pots. Twenty to thirty gallons each! Upon Jesus’ order, these were filled to the brim with water and when the wine steward at the reception tasted it, it was such a fine vintage of wine that he joked with the bridegroom, “Hey, you’re supposed to serve the best wine first, not save it for last.”

And so Jesus saved the day!

As is often the case, this passage spawns dozens of potential directions a sermon might go. Let’s think together about the party aspect of the wedding reception and Jesus’ role in it.

In the first half of John’s gospel, Jesus performs seven miracles. This is the first. In his gospel, John is never merely telling us about something that Jesus did once, but of something that Jesus continues to do today. (Barclay)

A Sunday School teacher read this passage to her class and then asked, “What do you think the point of this is? What are we supposed to learn from this story?” While the rest of the kids pondered this question, one little girl blurted, “When you have a wedding, it’s a good idea to have Jesus there!” That little story is a complete wedding homily, that is. When you have a wedding—and a subsequent 50-year marriage—it’s a good idea to have Jesus there.

Again from Barclay: “...what John wants us to see here is not (just) that Jesus once on a day turned some water pots of water into wine: he wants us to see that whenever Jesus comes into a (person’s) life, there comes a new quality which is like turning water into wine. Without Jesus, life (can be) dull and stale and flat; when Jesus comes into it, life becomes

vivid and sparkling and exciting.” (*Ibid.* pp. 104-105) The people I know who have most fully opened their spirits to the Spirit of Christ are the most alive and vibrant and interesting people I know.

A few years ago I conducted a wedding for an Oak Grove couple and at the reception when it came time to offer grace before the meal, I prefaced the prayer by saying to the assembled guests, “Jesus loved parties; so much so that his opponents declared him to be a glutton and a drunkard,” and then I did the prayer. A couple minutes later, one of the guests, a thirty-something young man came up to me and asked, “Is that true, what you said? Jesus was called ‘a glutton and a drunkard’?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s right there in the Bible.”

“Huh! That’s pretty cool.”

I’m guessing his previous church experience had not been very fun, had been only about rules and Thou Shalt Nots, and not much about joy. Yes, there is a place for rules, but remember, Jesus loved parties!

I had the privilege to hear Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners Magazine and the Sojourners community, speak at a gathering a few years ago. He told the story of a young woman from the US who, during the 1980s Central American upheavals, volunteered for a year in one of the refugee camps in either Nicaragua or Salvador, I don’t remember. (I was privileged to visit both countries in 1985, but those are stories for another day.) For this young volunteer it was hard and dangerous work. In one instance she actually swam across a river carrying a fleeing child on her back while bullets whizzed around them.

In this camp, the refugees had established three committees for the running of the camp—a committee for health, one for education and a committee for ...fun. So a fiesta was planned for a certain Saturday evening. On Saturday afternoon, one of the old women in the camp asked this young volunteer if she were planning to go to the party that evening. “No, no... I have too much work to do.”

The old women frowned. “Yes, you have that choice. You can keep working morning, noon and night because in a few months you will be going back to your safe and pleasant home. We HAVE to party, because we don’t know when, if ever, we can go home.”

The volunteer went to the fiesta.

Another story some of you have heard before, but it’s worth repeating.

Tony Campolo was a sociology professor and on the side a wonderful Baptist preacher and speaker. He’s retired from preaching, but still traveling the globe speaking. He was invited to speak to a group in Honolulu. So the first night he went to bed totally jet-lagged and woke

up at 3 o'clock in the morning. He knew more sleep was out of the question, so he got up, dressed, and went out walking in search of some breakfast.

*Up a side street, I found a little place that was still open. I went in, took a seat on one of the stools at the counter, and waited to be served. This was one of those sleazy places that deserves the name, "greasy spoon." I did not even touch the menu. I was afraid that if I opened the thing something gruesome would crawl out. But it was the only place I could find.*

*The guy behind the counter came over and asked, "What d'ya want?"*

*I said I wanted a cup of coffee and a donut.*

*He poured a cup of coffee, wiped his grimy hand on his smudged apron, and then he grabbed a donut off the shelf behind him...As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door of the diner suddenly swung open and, to my discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and boisterous prostitutes.*

*It was a small place, and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman beside me say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39."*

*Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?"*

*"Come on," said the woman sitting next to me. "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"*

*When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women had left. Then I called over the guy behind the counter, and I asked him, "Do they come in here every night?"*

*"Yeah!" he answered.*

*"The one right next to me, does she come here every night?"*

*"Yeah!" he said. "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanna know?"*

*"Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday...and that she'd never in her life had a birthday party. What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?"*

*A little smile slowly crossed his chubby cheeks, and he answered with delight, "I like it! That's a great idea!" Calling to his wife, who did the cooking in the back room, he shouted, "Hey! Come out here! This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow's Agnes's birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!"*

*She said, "That's wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody does anything nice and kind for her."*

*"Look," I told them, "if it's okay with you, I'll get back here tomorrow morning about 2:30 and decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake!"*

*"No way," said Harry (that was his name). "The birthday cake's my thing. I'm the baker. I'll make the cake."*

*At 2:30 the next morning, I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" I decorated the diner from one end to the other. I had that diner looking good.*

*Harry's wife, meanwhile, had gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. It was wall-to-wall prostitutes...and me!*

*At 3:30 on the dot, the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend. "Happy birthday!" we all screamed and clapped and whistled.*

*Never in my entire life have I seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, we all sang "Happy Birthday" to her. As the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just sobbed and sobbed.*

*After a few moments Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles. They're melting on the cake." She was unable to, so he did. Then he handed her a knife and told her, "Cut the cake, Agnes. Agnes, we all want some cake."*

*Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I, what I mean, is it okay if I kind of, what I want to ask you is, is it O.K. if I keep the cake a little while? I mean, is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"*

*Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure! It's your cake. It's O.K. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home, if you want to."*

*"Can I?" she asked. Then, looking at me, she said, "I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home, okay? I'll be right back. Honest!"*

*She got off the stool, picked up the cake, and carrying it like it was the Holy Grail, walked slowly toward the door. As we all stood there motionless, she left.*

*When the door closed, there was an awkward silence in the place. A birthday party without the guest of honor. Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?"*

*Looking back on it now, it seems more than strange for a sociologist to be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But then it just felt like the right thing to do. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for wholeness in her life. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her.*

*When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and growled, "Hey! You never told me you was a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"*

*In one of those rare moments when just the right words came, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."*

*"No you don't," sneered Harry. "There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. Yessiree, I'd join a church like that!"*

*Amen? Amen!*