

Sunday January 20th, 2019  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

**PRAYER:** Source of delight and rejoicing, you call us to assemble and partake of your banquet. The tables are spread with the abundance of your everlasting grace. Our cups overflow with the drink of new life. With Christ, our host, we join brothers and sisters to sing glad praises for all the wonders you have done. Amen.

**PRAYER OF CONFESSION:** We blend our voices in common confession, O God; for you are our hope of salvation. The Apostle teaches that there are varieties of gifts, yet we judge others because they do not fit our mold. There is one Saviour, yet we mistrust those who do not believe as we do, and doubt that they are led by the same Spirit. Forgive us for the many ways we sever the parts of Christ's body. Through him reconcile us and pardon our estrangement. Amen.

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** Remember that Christ "is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility." It is Christ who reconciles us "both to God in one body through the cross" (Eph. 2:14, 16). Through Christ, live in assurance that you are forgiven, and be joined together as fellow citizens of God's household.

**STEWARDSHIP:** "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but truth and action." (1 John 3:17-18)

**OFFERTORY PRAYER:** God of steadfast love, you give to each a measure of your bounteous mercy; accept what we offer in return as a gift of love from your family here. If it is service, make it pleasing in your sight. If it is wisdom, let it lead others to worship you alone. If it is dollars, multiply their effectiveness. Do this for the sake of Christ, whose gift of himself has made us one. Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** Gracious and Glorious God, the one who is our inspiration and source of all truth; we acknowledge in this precious hour of worship your call to us to serve through your Holy Spirit. It is this same loving Spirit that empowers us to serve with a vast variety of gifts, experiences and relationships. O Loving God, your grace is the living water that refreshes our thirsty spirits and cleanses us of all impurities. Your presence is like a fine wine that enlivens us and gives cause to our celebration. Having been renewed by your grace and mercy and having been made whole by the truth that sets us free, we offer all that we are in obedience to Christ's call.

We give you our knowledge. It was your gift to us at creation, for you implanted within us the taste of inquiry and exploration. May what we have learned be used to sustain and dignify all of the expressions of life you have graced this world with? Help us we ask, to interpret to others the mysteries of our faith that we have probed and you have revealed to us. Grant us graceful words that are understandable to others, so that they may hear and respond to the call of your good news. Let us never, O God, treat the knowledge you have granted us as a personal possession, instead help us to put into action what we have learned. Endow us with a courage only you can grant to set challenging goals, and the energy and discipline to attain them.

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Today and every day, we give you our ability to heal. May the Spirit of the living Christ continue to infuse us with compassion? May we always be responsive to those in need and sensitive to their unspoken cries for understanding and support? Give hope a name and a face as we move out toward the wounded in our world. Sharpen our vision to see not the overwhelming level of need in our world but the one soul in crisis within our easy reach. Help us to hear the moaning of our sister's and brother's unspoken prayers as your Holy Spirit does, so that we can offer our strength to those who feel weak, our voice to those who have no words left to say and our love to those who have spent all they have in the hopes of a better tomorrow.

We also want to give you our faith, which you have graciously given to us. It is through Christ that you taught us how to believe. By your Spirit's power we shall never forsake the quest for greater maturity in the Christian life. Make us eager to learn more of what it means to be Christ's faithful disciples. In all things guide us by your Holy Spirit, and make us instruments of your love and truth.

**BENEDICTION:** O God, as you are called a new name because of the life of Jesus Christ, we are called Christians because of our membership in Christ's church. Grant that, even as his words and deeds have brought glory to your name, our words and deeds shall bring glory to his name. Amen.

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John 2:1-11  
“Marital Bliss”

Love is a very powerful thing and you are never too old to experience its power. Thus, we can understand the incredible excitement that ran through the retirement home when Jacob, age 92, and Rebecca, age 89, decided to get married. On the evening of their engagement, Jacob suggests they take a stroll around downtown and make some plans for their upcoming nuptials.

They were like giddy teenagers as they walked, and talked, about their life together. As they walked, they happened upon the local drug store, and Jacob suggested they make a quick stop. Going directly to the main counter, Jacob addressed the man in a white lab coat who was working with numerous pill bottles. “Are you the owner?” Jacob asked. “Yes, I am”, replied the man.

Jacob continued, “We are about to be married. Do you sell heart medication?” “Of course, we do”, the pharmacist replied. “Medication for Arthritis?” “Definitely” the druggist replied. “How about medication for memory problems, arthritis, and Alzheimer’s?” Jacob continued. “Yes, we have several medicines for those problems.” “What about vitamins, sleeping pills, Geritol, treatments for Parkinson’s disease?”

“We have all those things, in stock.” The druggist assured Jacob. “Do you carry heartburn and indigestion relief?” “Yes, no problem.” “And what about walkers, canes and wheelchairs; do you have those items.” “We sure do. In all kinds of sizes and models and makes.” the druggist assured the couple. With this inquiry completed, Jacob turned to his finance and said, “Well, Rebecca, how about this place for our gift registry?”

It’s a cute story isn’t it? But have you noticed how odd weddings are becoming of late? There are destination weddings, where guests travel to some far-off place to celebrate a marriage. There was even a show on television called “Married at First Sight”. Where couples legally marry each other, immediately after seeing each other for the very first time. I even read about a bride who decided that instead of flower bouquets, she wanted her attendants to carry corgi puppies up the aisle.

I bet that went over well. Maybe they will make a new show called, “Say yes to the mess on the dress”. The most recent trend I’ve heard about, I kid you not, is one where people marry themselves. They go all out on these self-focused weddings. They make vows to themselves, have receptions, and then go on a honeymoon, alone. Personally, I just find this particular trend extremely sad.

There also seems to be this great push of late in weddings, to have some spectacle, or some novelty, to liven up what should be a happy occasion anyway. It also seems people want something ridiculous to happen, on camera, so it ends up on America’s Funniest Home Videos. I am now attending weddings where drones are used to capture overhead videos of the festivities. Weddings now have photographers and videographers. Receptions have candy buffets, where you can fill up a take home bag. I like this more

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than the old fruitcake or confetti candies they give out. I share all this with you to make the obvious point that as wedding celebrations change, so does the gulf between what used to be the norm and what is now the novelty. Now as most of us probably know, weddings were such a different undertaking in Jesus' day than today, but novelty was never the goal.

Wedding feasts in those days were pretty predictable. Sure, a wedding feast could go on for several days, with guests coming and going at all hours. And a wedding feast could literally put the host family in the poorhouse, providing all the wine and food. And I am sure that sometimes; it became a sort of contest to see if the guests could outlast the party provisions.

A wedding host's standing in the community would be based on how generous he was with his supply of party fare, and to run short before everyone was partied out, would bring shame on the host. It would also cast a negative shadow over the new couple. They would become known as the ones whose wine ran out. We also need to remember that life in Galilee, where this wedding was taking place, was very hard. Life consisted primarily of: subsistence farming, fishing, or in the case of Jesus' father, doing manual labour.

Instability brought on by famine, political oppression, threats of rebellion, and ridiculous taxation; gave little cause for joy. So, when a special event like a wedding occurred, everyone went all out, and took advantage of the joyful celebration. The guest list would often balloon outward, as people connected to invited guests, would tag along and join in. In a close-knit community, and with strong kinship ties, hardly anyone within easy walking distance would have been excluded.

The planning for this wedding at Cana would have begun, almost as soon as the betrothal was announced; a time frame of about a year ahead. One of the major preparations was securing enough wine to accommodate the guests. Therefore, many earthen jars, and wineskins, would have been stored away in a safe place in preparation. Wine would have been procured from relatives, friends, and any other source one could imagine.

The nature of this wine is somewhat debated among scholars. It is almost impossible to suggest that the wine was unfermented, as some conservative scholars who are uncomfortable with Jesus drinking alcohol like to argue. However, I should point out that by Roman times, the Jewish religious instruction called the Talmud, suggests watering down wine at a ratio of 3 parts water to one-part wine.

In the western Mediterranean world, the term "wine" refers to "mixed wine", and that means, with water added. Pure unaltered wine would be called unmixed wine. In some cases, cultures of the region diluted as much as 10 to one, and even more. Ancient Greeks even considered it barbaric to drink wine at full strength. So, I think it is safe to assume that at this wedding in Cana, the wine would have been diluted at least by a measure of 3-1, with the strong possibility that the water content grew as the wedding progressed.

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It is also true that the wine was graded by quality, with the wine that was vinegary, or poorer quality, being held to the end. Now having shared a little bit about the wine, (maybe more than you ever really wanted to know), that likely was present in Cana, an important question arises. When would say that a party, especially a wedding, is over?

When you are at a celebration, what signs are there that it is time to go home, or call a cab, or make it to your hotel room? If we had been at Cana, we might suggest that when the wine ran out the party was over. So, when is the party over? Who decides when the party is over? Many years ago, Laura and I attended a pot luck Christmas celebration for seminary students, and the ministers who acted as our field supervisors.

The meal went very well, and we just finished dessert, when one minister loudly announced that the party was over, and it was time to call it a night. It was 8pm. I should point out that it wasn't his home, or his church hall we were in, but for some strange reason, everyone listened to him and the party broke up. I still scratch my head over that one. Sometimes, I am sure you've all experienced this; you wish the party would end so you can go home.

Maybe you wish it would end, because you are not enjoying it very much, or don't know anyone very well. Maybe you are simply bored, or tired, and have had enough. Now what if it is at your own home, and you wonder how to get your guests to go home so you can clean up, or get some sleep? Ever had guests who just wouldn't leave at a reasonable time?

Now, here is, perhaps, a weird thought I had; when Mary comes and tells Jesus about the wine situation what does he say? "How does this concern you and me?" Then he adds, "My time has not come?" My weird thought has to do with his first question. It appears to me Jesus is saying, "Why is it my responsibility to determine if this party continues or not?" Jesus is not the host of this party, nor is he the master of ceremonies, or chief steward.

Jesus is simply a guest like everyone else, albeit a very special guest, but no one yet knows how special. Let me state this simply and clearly. What Jesus is saying is "This is not my party!"

"I didn't plan it. I didn't invite anyone to it. Nor did you, mother. We have nothing to do with this. Why are you fussing about it?" Jesus comment, "My time has not yet come" speaks volumes that he is not to be the focus of attention at this event. Maybe the party should end, despite the embarrassment it might cause the host. Surely the host was probably wishing he could think of a quiet way to get everyone to go home.

There was no Seven-Eleven open nearby to restock the supplies, or all-night liquor stores. We don't know what else transpired between Mary and Jesus, but eventually Mary demonstrates her faith in Jesus ("Do whatever he says.") and he turns the water into wine and the party continues.

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This miracle, John says, is his first miraculous sign, and it is loaded with symbolism, but what I find important today is that I realized Jesus is now making the wedding at Cana his party.

One of the prophetic signs of the Messiah coming was new wine. Zechariah 9:16-17 reads, “When that day arrives, the Lord their God will rescue his people, just as a shepherd rescues his sheep. They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown. How wonderful and beautiful they will be! The young men and women will thrive on the abundance of grain and new wine.”

The master of ceremonies tries the wine and is overcome with surprise. He immediately goes to the bridegroom and reports this, “Usually a host serves the best wine first, and then, when everyone is full and doesn’t care, he brings out the less expensive wines. But you have kept the best for now.” The MC is honouring the bridegroom for being incredibly generous; saving the best for last. That is the nature of Jesus’ party.

That is the nature of the Kingdom of God. “The best is saved for last”. When Jesus gets involved, nobody wants the party to end, because there is something better always coming. There is always a surprise, a blessing, a merciful expression of grace. God in Christ, as our host, is always abundantly generous at his party. There are signs of this generosity all through the gospels.

There is, of course, the feeding of the multitudes in which we are told that everyone was satisfied, and yet there were twelve baskets left over. Zechariah said there would be an abundance of grain, didn’t he? Jesus was generous with his time by going to, and even partying with people no one else bothered with, like Zacchaeus the tax collector. He saw the beauty in the unnamed woman’s gift of perfume at another party, and the washing of his feet with her tears and hair.

He was generous with his forgiveness with the woman caught in adultery, and the woman at the well in John 4. When Jesus states he is the vine, and we are the branches, he is letting us know there will be wine pouring forth all over the place in God’s kingdom. There will be fruit beyond reckoning. God is not stingy, holding back the best. Just when you thought God’s party couldn’t get any better, he offers up something even better.

The Apostle Paul marches into this discussion, by stating that Christ is the bridegroom and we, the church, are the bride. The wine won’t run out at this wedding. The provisions will be perfect and abundant. Read the Gospel’s again and you see how Jesus describes the Kingdom of God. He always uses celebratory words.

In all my scripture reading I have yet to run across Jesus saying something like this, “The Kingdom of God is like a funeral or a wake.” No, he says things like; the Kingdom of God is like a banquet, a wedding. Jesus also uses images like the mustard seed that grows into a tree, to highlight that the Kingdom of God will begin very small, but will grow into something magnificent.

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Making a celebration perfect is a daunting task. I came across a story about a man who asked his wife what she would most like for her birthday. She said, "Oh, I'd love to be ten again." The man came up with a great idea and on the morning of her birthday he took his wife to an amusement park. They rode every ride together. At lunch time he took her to McDonald's and they had a Big Mac, French fries and a big shake.

After lunch, he took her to an afternoon movie to watch the latest children's movie-complete with popcorn and cola. At last she staggered home with her husband, and collapsed into bed. Her husband leaned over and asked, "So, sweetheart, what was it like to being ten again?" She looked at him and said quietly, "Actually, I was referring to my dress size."

What Jesus is telling us is that not only is God's Kingdom a party; it's a perfect party. Maybe it's not the image you have held about God's Kingdom. Maybe you have feared the Kingdom coming, because of the inherit judgment attached to it. Maybe you have thought of the Kingdom of God as akin to a root canal, or hip replacement; very unpleasant and messy stuff. The Pharisees certainly had visions like this, but it is wrong.

Maybe it's the nature of life, and I don't know about you, but to be honest I am finding as I get older, reasons to celebrate are becoming fewer and farther between. But I have also noticed that so many of our regular times for celebration are becoming more of a burden than a cause for joy. I've overheard recently how some people are so glad Christmas is over. This time of celebration has for many, become a burden.

You maybe have heard the little story about a family who invited some folks over for dinner. The mother who had spent hours preparing the meal asked her six-year-old to say grace at the meal.

The child replied that they didn't know what to say, but the mother persisted and suggested the child just say what mommy says. Well everyone bowed their heads and out came this prayer, "Dear God, why on earth did I agree to this dinner party?" You've been there, haven't you? Hosting a party, and even going to one, can be draining both physically and financially. I am really selling the "Look who's coming to dinner event."

But have you ever received an invitation to a party that you just couldn't wait to attend? I am not talking about those invites where you feel an obligation to go, and put in an appearance. I am talking about a party where you cannot wait to get your shoes shined up and your party clothes prepped. The party invitation you receive that gets you marking the date in ink, and not just in pencil, on your calendar.

Maybe you are the person of honour at the party, like at your own wedding or special birthday. Life is tough sometimes, maybe most of the time for some people, therefore isn't it great to go to a party once in a while? Isn't it great to celebrate? Don't you wish you could take the ordinary water of life, and have it turned into the best wine you've ever had? This is what Jesus is offering you; to fill your cup to the brim and have it overflowing.

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The invitations have been sent. The provisions have been secured. All is ready. Come church, your bridegroom has summoned you to party the likes of which you have never experienced before.