

John 2: 1-11

WEDDINGS ARE GREAT MOMENTS BUT WEDDINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS THE EASIEST TO PULL OFF. WEDDINGS CAN BE COMPLICATED. MOST LARGE CONGREGATIONS HAVE A WEDDING COORDINATORS ON STAFF TO MANAGE THE PROCESS, AND IT IS NO SIMPLE MATTER. LOTS CAN GO WRONG AND OFTEN DOES. THE FIRST WEDDING I OFFICIATED WAS WHEN I WAS AN INTERN...THE BEST MAN FAINTED. ANOTHER WEDDING THE FLOWER GIRL DIDN'T HAVE HER PETALS TO SCATTER, BUT DIDN'T REALIZE THIS UNTIL IT WAS HER TURN TO WALK DOWN THE AISLE..RIGHT IN FRONT OF THE BRIDE. THE ENTIRE WEDDING PARTY WAS AT THE FRONT OF THE CHURCH...INCLUDING MYSELF. THE FLOWER GIRL'S MOTHER DECIDED TO LEAVE THE CHURCH, DRIVE TO THE LOCAL FLORAL SHOP (ON THE OTHER SIDE OF TOWN) TO GET THE MISSING PETALS. ALL THE WHILE THE ORGANIST KEPT PLAYING AND REPLAYING WHILE WE ALL STOOD THERE.

YES, LOTS CAN GO WRONG. BUT LOTS CAN GO RIGHT...AND ALWAYS DOES. MANY PEOPLE CRY AT WEDDINGS, NOT JUST THE PARENTS, BUT SOMETIMES THE BRIDE CRIES; SOMETIMES THE GROOM CRIES; SOMETIMES THEY BOTH CRY. TEARS OF HAPPINESS. TEARS OF JOY. AFTERWARD, ONE OF THINGS THAT ALWAYS GOES RIGHT IS THE RECEPTION. REMARKABLE EVENTS, THEY SERVE AS A FAMILY REUNION, TWO REUNIONS IN FACT. THEY BRING TOGETHER A GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS, MOST OF WHOM HAVE NOTHING IN COMMON WITH ONE ANOTHER OTHER THAN THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BRIDE OR GROOM. AND ON THAT BASIS ALONE THEY BECOME A VERY HAPPY COMMUNITY WHOSE SOLE PURPOSE IS TO REJOICE, CELEBRATE, HAVE FUN.

ONE TIME JESUS ATTENDED A WEDDING. WEDDINGS WENT ON FOR DAYS, NOT JUST A FEW HOURS. RATHER THAN A HONEYMOON THE WEDDING LASTED SEVEN DAYS AT THE GROOM'S HOME. THERE WAS PLENTY OF EATING AND DRINKING, DANCING AND SINGING. THERE WAS LOTS OF LAUGHTER. AND AT THIS PARTICULAR WEDDING, ONE OF THE WORST POSSIBLE THINGS THAT COULD HAPPEN, HAPPENED. THE WINE RAN OUT. THE STEWARD...THE WEDDING COORDINATOR...IS IN A PANIC.

JESUS AND HIS NEW DISCIPLES AND HIS MOTHER ARE THERE, AT CANA, NINE MILES FROM NAZARETH. MARY, SENSING THE DISASTER THAT IS UNFOLDING, ESSENTIALLY SAYS TO JESUS, "DO SOMETHING." HIS RESPONSE IS A LITTLE TESTY. HE SAYS, ESSENTIALLY, "MOTHER! IT'S NOT MY PROBLEM, OR YOURS FOR THAT MATTER." AND THEN HE DOES IT.

EVERY HOME HAD A LARGE STONE JAR, TWENTY TO THIRTY GALLONS, TO HOLD THE WATER REQUIRED IN A JEWISH HOME FOR PURIFICATION PURPOSES, FOR HAND WASHING BEFORE AND AFTER MEALS, AND FOR WASHING CUPS AND UTENSILS. FOR SOME REASON THERE ARE SIX OF THEM. "FILL THEM," JESUS SAYS. "FILL THEM ALL TO THE TOP." THE WAIT STAFF DOES IT. "LET THE STEWARD TASTE IT." THE STEWARD DOES: TASTES IT, CALLS THE GROOM

OVER, AND OBSERVES A LOVELY SURPRISE. "THIS IS REALLY GOOD WINE, A LOT BETTER, IN FACT, THAN WHAT WE'VE BEEN SERVING."

THAT'S IT. THE PARTY GOES ON. IT IS A SIGN, THE GOSPEL WRITER OF JOHN SAYS: A SIGN OF JESUS' GLORY. HOW IS THAT FOR A HAPPY ENDING? EVERYONE SEEMS TO SENSE THAT THE JOYOUS FEAST HAS BEEN SAVED.

SOMETIMES THE CHURCH FORGETS THAT JESUS ONCE ATTENDED A WEDDING FEAST AND SAID YES TO GLADNESS AND JOY. PROMPTED BY HIS MOTHER, JESUS TURNED WATER INTO WINE TO POINT US TO HIS HEAVENLY FATHER, A GOD WHO LOVES TO HEAR THE LAUGHTER OF HIS PEOPLE. SOMETIMES THE CHURCH HAS FORGOTTEN TO LIVE THE JOY OF SUCH REVELATION. THIS STORY HAS TO DO WITH HUMAN LIFE AT ITS MOST HUMAN. THIS STORY OF JESUS'S ABUNDANT PROVISION FOR A JOYFUL FEAST LEADS US TO ALSO MEET JESUS IN THE COMMON JOYS OF LIFE. TOO MANY HAVE THE IDEA THAT FAITHFUL CHRISTIANITY IS ABOUT SELF-DENIAL, SELF-NEGATION, AND THAT PLEASURE OF ANY KIND IS AT LEAST SUSPECT. PURITANISM, H.L. MENCKEN SAID, IS "THE HAUNTING FEAR THAT SOMEONE, SOMEWHERE, MAY BE HAPPY."

GOD DOES NOT WANT OUR RELIGION TO BE TOO HOLY TO BE HAPPY IN. THROUGHOUT HIS LIFE AND MINISTRY, JESUS CELEBRATED PEOPLE...PEOPLE GETTING MARRIED, PEOPLE BEING HEALED OF DISEASE AND DEFORMITY, PEOPLE ENJOYING MEALS TOGETHER. HE CARRIED A SPIRIT OF JOY WITH HIM WHEREVER HE WENT AS HE PROCLAIMED A GOD OF MERCY AND PEACE AND JOY.

GOD DOES NOT DESPISE OUR HUMANNESS, OUR HUMANITY, AND NEITHER SHOULD WE. CONRAD HYERS WROTE THE BOOK, *AND GOD CREATED LAUGHTER* IN WHICH HE OBSERVES THAT THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND JACOB, PAUL AND JESUS IS IMAGINED TO BE TOTALLY HUMORLESS, INFINITE IN GRAVITY. THE OVERWHELMING BIAS HAS BEEN TO ASSOCIATE GOD AND RELIGION PRIMARILY WITH THE SERIOUS SIDE, PREFERABLY OUR MOST SERIOUS MOMENTS. WE SEE OURSELVES AS MOST RELIGIOUS WHEN WE ARE AT OUR DREARIEST AND DULLEST. CHRISTIANS OUGHT TO BE CELEBRATING CONSTANTLY BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN LIBERATED FROM THE FEAR OF LIFE AND THE FEAR OF DEATH. WE OUGHT TO ATTRACT PEOPLE TO THE CHURCH QUITE LITERALLY BY THE FUN THERE IS IN BEING A CHRISTIAN.

TODAY WE HEAR OF JESUS BRINGING THE GIFT OF JOY AND CELEBRATION TO A WEDDING PARTY. WHAT A WAY FOR JESUS TO BEGIN HIS PUBLIC MINISTRY IN JOHN'S GOSPEL! THE DEEPER IMPLICATION IS THAT IN HIM, HIS COMING INTO THE WORLD, HIS COMING INTO YOUR LIFE AND MINE AT ITS MOST HUMAN, IS SOMETHING SO GOOD, SO PROFOUNDLY, DEEPLY AND POWERFULLY GOOD THAT THE ONLY APPROPRIATE RESPONSE IS JOY.

IT IS NOT A SUPERFICIAL JOY IN THE BIBLE, A DENIAL OF TRAGEDY, A REFUSAL TO BE REALISTIC, A POLLYANNAISH OPTIMISM THAT EVERYTHING IS JUST FINE. RATHER JOY IN THE BIBLE COMES IN THE MIDST OF DIFFICULT AND TRYING AND SOMETIMES TRAGIC CIRCUMSTANCES: EXILE, LONELINESS, PERSECUTION, SUFFERING, DEATH. IN ALL OF IT, GOD'S PEOPLE CONTINUE TO BE JOYFUL. WHY? NOT BECAUSE THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES ARE WONDERFUL, BUT BECAUSE OF THE PROMISE THAT REGARDLESS OF CIRCUMSTANCE, GOD WILL NOT LET GO, WILL NOT ABANDON, BUT WILL BE WITH THEM...WHEVEREVER THEY ARE, WHATEVER IS HAPPENING TO THEM.

IN OUR OWN NATIONAL EXPERIENCE, CHRISTIAN PREACHERS SUCH AS MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., ROSE UP, NOT ONLY TO CHALLENGE THE LAW IN ACTS OF COURAGEOUS CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, BUT ALSO TO CHALLENGE AFRICAN AMERICAN PEOPLE TO REMEMBER WHO THEY WERE AND WHOSE THEY WERE.

AND THE RESULT..EVEN IN THE MIDST OF SLAVERY AND DISCRIMINATION AND PERSECUTION AND LYNCHING...WAS A LITERATURE AND POETY AND A MUSIC UTTERLY AND AUTHENTICALLY JOYFUL. "MY LORD! WHAT A MORNING, WHEN THE STARS BEGIN TO FALL." "GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN." "THERE IS A BALM IN GILEAD TO MAKE THE WOUNDED WHOLE."

FOR MANY PEOPLE, THEIR PERSONAL NEWS IS NOT GOOD: ILLNESS, A SUDDEN, UNEXPECTED, OUT-OF-THE-BLUE DIAGNOSIS; AGING, RISKY SURGERY, RELATIONSHIPS THAT ARE NOT FULFILLING; EMPLOYMENT THAT IS DISSAPOINTING. AND THE PROMISE IS THAT INTO PRECISELY THOSE SO VERY HUMAN PLACES, PLACES WHERE YOU AND I ARE MOST HUMAN...WHERE OUR DEEPEST HOPES AND FEARS RESIDE, OUR STRONGEST PASSIONS, OUR DEAREST LOVE----IT IS PRECISELY INTO THOSE PLACES THAT JESUS CHRIST COMES WITH TRANSFORMING POWER.

THE NEWS IS GOOD, SO UTTERLY AND PROFOUNDLY GOOD. JESUS CAME TO A WEDDING, JESUS KEPT THE CELEBRATION GOING. INCREDIBLY, PERHAPS CONTRARY TO WHAT YOU MAY HAVE CONCLUDED LONG AGO, GOD DELIGHTS IN YOU AND WILL NEVER LET YOU GO. IN FACT, THE BIBLE SAYS YOU HAVE A NEW NAME THAT YOU MAY NOT EVEN KNOW ABOUT: GOD'S DELIGHT. THANKS BE TO GOD!

