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Extravagant Sign

John 2:1-11

Our lesson today is the wedding feast at Cana—the first miracle Jesus ever performed. There have been a number of weddings I have performed that qualify as miracles.

Simply surviving these occasions was convincing evidence to me that a bona fide miracle had taken place! Of the hundreds of weddings I have performed, let me share a few that continue to live on in my memory:

When I was in graduate school, I performed a wedding in the University Chapel. When it came time for the giving and receiving of rings, the bride, in a full scale panic, suddenly whispered, “I don't have his ring! I don't know where it is!” I was the only person in the wedding party who was married. The groom had the bride's ring, and suddenly everyone looked at my wedding ring. While I thought the wedding gods might send down a bolt of lightning, I took off my ring and handed it to the bride! The groom couldn't get my ring over the first knuckle; maybe that was a blessing! In any event, I hope Jesus understands, because it was the only thing I could think of to do.

Another ring adventure happened at Hammond Street several years ago. Two former members were being married. The bride whom I think could be fairly described as “generously endowed,” was wearing a low-cut wedding dress. Even I found it distracting! Somehow the bride ended up with both rings in her hand. Not knowing what to do, she suddenly put one of them in her bosom! Later the organist of the day told me she said to herself, “She'll never find it!” But another wedding miracle occurred. When the bride “went fishing,” she found the ring right away!

Bridal veils and trains can also be hazards, I have discovered. As I read out the vows years ago to a couple in Corpus Christi, the bride was holding a lighted taper in her right hand. Without realizing what she was doing, the taper fell against the veil. As a hole in the veil immediately started to form and grow larger, I reached my hand up to snatch the whole thing off the bride's head. And yet, miracle of miracles, she flicked the flame away and the hole stopped growing! The bride was beyond shocked when I pointed out her “holy veil” when we were taking pictures!

The second wedding I ever performed was in Southern Indiana in 1972. It would take a long time to tell you about this incredible comedy of errors. As unbelievable as the whole wedding was with gum chewing and shorts at the rehearsal and a missing mother of the groom and a wedding runner that was never pulled and a hysterical bridesmaid who sobbed through the ceremony, somehow we got through the service.

At the end of the ceremony, as the bride turned to leave, to my complete horror, I saw the maid of honor unknowingly put her heel at the foot of her sister's train. That set off a reaction like nothing I have ever witnessed before or since. As the bride launched herself down the aisle, bobby pins started flying, the top knot pulled off, and the tiara and veil and train all fell to the floor! While the congregation took a collective gasp, the bride burst out laughing—which saved the day!

One more story...two years ago, a former member of Hammond Street came to ask me to officiate at the wedding of himself and his fiancée at Cascade Park. When I asked the bride who would be standing up with her, she said, “my pet ferret.” When I said, “really?” the bride assured me that the animal was her best friend. “She looks really cute in a blue dress I made for her. We'll also have the rings tied on a cord around her neck.”

I had a growing sense of alarm about this wedding, and then the groom called to say there was a change in venue. He explained that his uncle, who was the president of a biker gang in the south, had just died in Bangor. As a way to honor him, 500 bikers were planning to travel here for a ceremony the same day as the wedding. The bikers were being added to the guest list, and the wedding was being moved to the park across the street from the homeless shelter. Fortunately good sense prevailed, and I declined to perform the wedding and never heard another word about it!

As you can see, I have witnessed many wedding miracles during my ministry. Now while Jesus only performed one miracle at Cana, I really don't want to take anything away from him; because that miracle, as Emily Bean would say, was an honest-to-God miracle!

Each of my wedding stories revolves around a crisis, and the story John tells in today's lesson also revolves around a crisis: at the wedding feast, they have run out of wine. We read that it was the third day of the celebration, and Jesus and the disciples have been invited as guests. As you may know, practicing hospitality in the Middle East is a badge of honor, but it's really more than that. One commentator has said that “...the people of Jesus' time and culture practiced it as a survival skill, a way of looking after one another in a hostile and perilous environment...” (Kathryn M. Matthews, “Extravagant Sign/Signs of Celebration,” Sermon Seeds). To this very day, people in those countries are taught to offer room and board to total strangers. So you can imagine the burden placed on the bride's family to properly entertain guests. We're told that wedding receptions in Ancient Israel were lavish affairs sometimes lasting many days. People saved for years to be able to spare no expense for the wedding of their children. So running out of the only beverage--wine--would have been regarded as an unpardonable offense.

Enter the mother of Jesus. We can't be sure what her role in this wedding is, whether she is a hostess or simply an interested party, but she chooses to tell Jesus about this calamity. The continued success of the feast is hanging in the balance--all of

these party-goers with nothing to drink. Mary is obviously wishing to save the host embarrassment and says to Jesus, "They have no wine." Whereupon Jesus says, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?" One interpreter says that Mary may well have thought to herself, "what-ever" (Matthews). And then Jesus, adds, cryptically, "My hour is not yet come."

The passage from John is all about timing. Jesus is speaking here about his time left on earth. Mary is talking about the timing of the food and drink at the wedding feast. But the mother of Jesus elects to say no more, hoping obviously, that Jesus will sense the urgent need of this situation. So Mary turns to the servants and says, "Do whatever he tells you." One scholar has said that the "Mary factor" in the story is an important one, because the mother of Jesus is clearly a practitioner of "compassionate justice." She "shows that 'she is a woman with all the compassionate sensitiveness to other people's needs, often lacking in men, especially those in power'" (Chung Hyun Kyung, Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology).

It is clear Jesus gets the message. Clearly if the needs of the people are to be met, a miracle is required. The spirit of improvisation is upon Jesus. He wants the bride to be happy, and so the text tells us Jesus spies six stone water jars that are being used for the Jewish rites of purification. For the Jews, seven is the number signifying perfection and completion. The six stone jars, therefore, represent that which is incomplete and the imperfections in the Jewish law (William Barclay, The Gospel of John, Vol. 1).

In ancient Jewish life, the water jar was of extreme importance. William Barclay says that water was required for two purposes: cleansing dusty feet upon entering a house and for hand washing. "Strict Jews washed before a meal and between each course." If this practice was not followed before each meal and between courses, Jewish ceremonial law insisted the hands were technically unclean. That is the purpose, then, of having the six stone water jars (Barclay).

Furthermore, John tells us that the jars are large--each one holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus instructs the servants to fill the water jars to the top. Then he tells the servants to take some out, and to take it to the chief steward. Then, of course, the steward and the servants discover that Jesus has turned the water into wine. Jesus may have thought his "hour had not come," but for the bride and groom Jesus is the man of the hour. For the master of improvisation has indeed performed a genuine miracle!

If Jesus' timing saves the day, then the timing of the story is saved by the chief steward who delivers the "punch line." He says, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." It's been observed that "God hasn't just saved the best wine for last but, more significantly, God's 'very best to Israel and the world'" (Kathryn Matthews quoting Richard Bauckham, The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels).

While holy timing is a theme of this story, great abundance is another. It's been said that the Miracle at Cana is akin to the miracle of the loaves and fishes. From six stone jars comes an extravagant amount of wine—up to 180 gallons--that no wedding party could ever finish. From five loaves and two fish comes enough food to feed 5,000 people with many baskets left over. In both stories, Jesus reaches out to everyday people facing a crisis of need. The divine response is not just enough food or drink, but an overflowing amount--beyond all imagining.

The wedding at Cana is a metaphor for the lavishness of God's grace. It is the idea that Jesus orders a generous plan that is the reverse of what we think. Life gets better as we experience it, Jesus seems to be saying. The good wine, the life of celebration, is there for us the longer we experience it. The chief steward is right: God in Christ has done a surprising thing. The best life is to be savored now--not before, not later.

There has been much written and said about the fact that the turning of water into wine was the first sign, the first miracle Jesus performed. You may know that long ago the members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union were fond of taking hatchets to saloons and saloon keepers. And so when the plain-spoken president of a local chapter of the WCTU was told that Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine, the old matron was heard to say, "I knew there was something I didn't like about that guy!"

Several commentators have reminded us that Jesus knew how to have a good time: "Sometimes the church has forgotten that Our Lord once attended a wedding feast and said yes to gladness and joy." in Feasting on the Word, Robert Brearly writes, "God does not want our religion to be too holy to be happy in." What we have in the Cana story is an example of life that is to be lived vibrantly, fully and abundantly. "When John's Gospel speaks of salvation as life, the meaning is not mere life, but life in its maximal sense: life invigorated and intensified" (Bauckham, The Lectionary Commentary).

The wedding feast at Cana, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, the parable of the great banquet, the widow's mite, the story of the alabaster jar--all of them--and more are Biblical tales celebrating the lavish liberality of God. I wonder where the theme of overflowing generosity in today's scripture lesson meets you and me. These stories which focus on extravagant excess may stand in marked contrast to our own lives and what people in our country, refugees at our Southern border and immigrant peoples around the world are experiencing.

Instead of plenty, some Americans complain of scarcity. The hundreds of thousands of people fleeing violence and poverty, for example, face the New Year with devastating losses-- ranging from their families to homes to possessions to a way of life. An alarming number of Americans live below the poverty line. While the economy is making some genuine gains, red ink is still present. The pain and agony of a partially

shut down government, food insecurity and bankruptcies are still terrible realities for some of our American brothers and sisters.

I return to Jesus' remark at the beginning of the wedding feast at Cana: "My hour is not yet come." For too many of God's people around the globe, they are feeling that their hour has come and gone. How does Hammond Street Congregational Church exist as an extravagant sign of God's boundless love?

I believe HSCC will continue to reach out to the least, the lost and the last. For God in Christ always wants you and me to do signs and wonders, to transform the world around us--by turning "despair into hope, hatred into love, violence into healing" (Matthews).

Amen and amen!

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