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John 2:1-11

THE LIFE OF THE PARTY

Does anyone besides me feel like we need a good party? We here at UPC had a really good party back in November when we celebrated our congregation's 100th anniversary. But it feels like we could use another celebration of some kind right about now. Life is especially heavy these days and very little in our lives seems to be flourishing: the nation's health and the world's health are certainly not flourishing, our schools are not flourishing, our churches and denominations are not flourishing, our nation's democracy is not flourishing especially well, and the planet, the planet itself is not flourishing.

It is at just such a time when so much in our world is not thriving particularly well that we could use a party, some reason for celebrating. Because, at its essence, a party is an affirmation of life. And surely that is what we need at this time: an occasion to help us affirm life and the goodness of life. And that is why Covid has been so especially hard on us, because in order to thwart the virus, we had to curtail our parties and celebrations. And so weddings, graduations, birthdays, baptisms, anniversaries, and community festivals have had to be cancelled or postponed. We at UPC were fortunate that back in the fall we had a relatively calm window of opportunity before Omicron arose where we could, with careful precautions, still organize a wonderful anniversary party. But as the virus flared again, many societal celebrations have once again been put on hold.

Today's Bible passage is the story of a party. Jesus, his mother, and his disciples are attending a wedding party. Parties such as this one were no doubt much needed bright moments in otherwise harsh existence. The people of Jesus' world knew crushing poverty and were

vulnerable to sickness and disease and early death. They had no voting rights, no retirement funds, no health care plans. Each day was a struggle to survive. And then there was Rome. The people were terrorized by the violence and cruelties of their Roman oppressors, made to witness Rome's public crucifixions along their highways, forced to pay excessive taxations that only further their impoverishment. Their lives were harsh and hard and precarious.

But still they seized opportunities for celebration; they found reasons to affirm the goodness of life. Today's story is about a party—a wedding celebration. It is a story made famous by the account of how, when the wine gave out, Jesus turned water into wine.

Throughout Christian history, this story has both unsettled some people of faith and been misinterpreted by others. Some faith groups that are opposed to the consumption of alcohol have had to reckon with the drinking of wine in the story and some have argued that Jesus' miracle involved making wine that was non-alcoholic. But there is nothing in this story that supports such a belief.

Other Christians have maintained that this biblical story supports the idea that marriage should only be between a man and a woman. But while the setting of the story is indeed a wedding, the bride and the groom have almost no presence in this account whatsoever. The wedding is not really the focus of the story, nor is the consumption of wine. Instead, this story is all about God's abundant gifts, especially the gift of grace.

Grace, as we may recall, is the theological belief in God's love and mercy. Take God's love and forgiveness and roll them all up together, and you have grace. The writer of John's gospel wants to reveal something about God's grace, but he does not just *tell* us about grace. Instead, John gives us a visual aid. Do you remember when your teacher would use a visual aid

to help explain a lesson? This story is John's visual aid. Instead of telling us about God's grace, John *shows* us. He gives us this story.

We are given a clue that this story is about something much larger than simply a wedding by how John begins the story. John writes, "On the third day there was a wedding in Cana." *On the third day*. When in the Bible have you heard that phrase before? The third day is the day of resurrection. On the third day he rose again from the grave. John doesn't just throw that phrase in the story for no reason. After all, why would anyone care what day the wedding happened, unless it was somehow important? The gospel writer John gives us this detail because he wants us to make a connection between this story and the resurrection.

And then John includes in the story the presence of Jesus' mother, who in John's gospel only appears two times: the first time she appears is here in this story, right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and then the second time is at Jesus' crucifixion. In John's gospel, Jesus' mother brackets his life. Her appearance here in this wedding account points forward to the crucifixion.

That's what John is trying to do: John uses this wedding story to point to something else. The gospel writer John never uses the word "miracle" in his gospel. Instead, John refers to Jesus' amazing actions as "signs." Think about what road signs do. They point the way to some place. Jesus' astonishing actions are signs that point to something. And so we must look at Jesus' amazing act of turning water into wine as a sign pointing to something.

If all we focus on is the actual miracle that water was turned into wine, we will overlook two other crucial elements of the story. Essential to this story are the elements of *quantity* and *quality*. Jesus could have just turned a dozen bottles of water into wine. That would probably have been sufficient to meet the need. But instead, Jesus has the servants fill six massive stone

jars full of water. Each of these jars could hold as much as thirty gallons. John wants us to know that these jars were completely filled because he even tells us that they were filled right up to the brim. A massive *quantity* of wine was produced from this miracle.

In the story the steward is surprised by the exceptional *quality* of the new wine. This isn't some cheap boxed wine; this wine is of a superior vintage.

This story is about a divine gift of tremendous proportions. It is a story about abundance. Think about the contrast between the people's reality and this divine gift. God's gift of abundance comes to those people living in the midst of great impoverishment. God's gift of abundance comes to those living among a scarcity of hope.

And consider this: almost no one at the party even knew about it. Jesus knew what had taken place. His disciples knew about this miracle. The servants who filled up the water jars knew about the astonishing miracle. But no one else knew—not the bride and the groom, and not the other wedding guests. And yet, they all enjoyed the gift. They all benefitted from this divine gift.

And with this sign, the gospel writer of John points to the crucifixion and the resurrection. That's what this story is about, he whispers to us. At the wedding the wine gave out and human resources were at an end. And then Jesus stepped in with a divine gift of tremendous proportions. And we listening to this story are supposed to recognize how this is what takes place at the crucifixion and resurrection. When human resources were at an end, *we* were given a divine gift of tremendous proportions. The miracle at the wedding is a sign pointing to the outpouring of love and mercy that takes place in Jesus' death and resurrection—the abundant gift of grace that is showered upon all people, even those who are unaware of its existence.

When the party came to an end, when all the guests had drunk their fill and grew tired of dancing and celebrating, they would head home. They would head back into their lives and all the same problems and realities would surely be there waiting for them. The same is true for us. The threats of climate change and human inaction toward it, the political divisions, the ongoing pandemic, our personal struggles—these are our reality. But so too are God’s abundant gifts. God’s abundant gifts are also part of our reality. And like those living it up at the party, God’s gifts are enough for today. And while these gifts often go unknown or unrecognized by us, these gifts are all around us.

It can be hard to see these abundant gifts—especially when the forces of darkness and despair and death are so prevalent. And I confess that I struggle at times to find them. There are days when I can hardly stomach the news. It is easy to be filled with despair. That is why I need you. I need the community of believers. We need each other to look for God’s gifts, to point them out, and to lift them up in celebration—because the life-giving God of good gifts abides with us. And they are sufficient for today.

With his generous gift of superior wine, Jesus could easily be considered the life of any party. What if we were to consider our lives the party to which Jesus is invited? Imagine Jesus as the life of *your* party—the bringer of divine gifts of tremendous proportions.