

Sermon ✝ January 16, 2022

John 2:1-11

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There is a story that comes out of China, from the period of the great Christian missionary effort. A provincial official had been sent to investigate the problem of conversions to Christianity and he was asking the headman of one of the villages in the province about the matter.

“And do you have any Christians in your village?”

“Oh yes, sir; there are Christians here.”

The official looked out the door of the man's house into the street,

“Are there any out there now?”

“Yes, sir, there are.”

“How are you certain? I see no special way of dressing, nothing obvious that tells me there are Christians in your village. How do you know who are Christians and who are not?”

“Oh, sir, that is easy. The Christians are the happy ones.”

Now suppose someone came to Sister Bay looking for Christians. Would the Christians be the happy ones? When people speak of active church members, what do they say? *“Oh, she works hard for her church.” “He's a real Christian gentleman.” “My daughter spent so much time at church when she was in high school, I thought she'd take her bed down there.”*

Busy people, earnest people, dedicated people. But . . . how about happy people? Is it okay to be happy and be a Christian? I do not remember much laughter in the church of my childhood.

There is at choir anthem which contains the line: *“To the wise, life is a festival.”* Think about that for a moment. Our definitions of life and wisdom scarcely agree with this phrase.

To be wise is to have a deep sense of the uncertainties and complexities of life. And to have experienced life is to have gained the understanding that illness and bereavement and injustice are the certainties of human existence.

To the wise, life is a festival. Is that true or isn't it? The question is more important than you may think.

My guess is that many folks simply don't believe that life is a festival. Oh, they may wish it to be . . . but they don't believe it is.

One of the great battles faced by humankind is to win the human heart to the conviction that life is, indeed, a festival. Albeit, a long, up hill struggle . . . often sad and weary.

Now there are plenty of people around who are ready to tell us what a wonderful thing life is. But the message is often selfish and shallow. Life is a wonderful thing and it will be even better . . . as soon as you buy their book. Their message is not that life is a wonderful thing, but only that there are all kinds of ways of escaping from life.

In John's gospel we read that Jesus very first miracle took place at a wedding feast. The first act of Jesus' ministry was to go to a party and help people have a better time. What a marvelous thing! Jesus changed water into wine (not just any wine . . . the best wine). Jesus' ministry, John tells us, begins with joy.

And if you look for it, you will see that much of Jesus' ministry and life takes place in the midst of celebrations. How often we find Jesus eating with people, talking with people, enjoying himself with people.

His parables include stories of wedding banquets and great feasts. When a man finds that his guests won't come to his party he sends his servants out to bring in beggars and outcasts . . . so determined is he to have a party. And this, Jesus tells us, this is what the kingdom of God is like.

This is what all of history is heading toward. This is the fulfillment of God's design for creation. And even when the end comes . . . Calvary, the Cross, and Gethsemane. . . . after the doubt, darkness, and defeat . . . there comes Easter. And that, Christianity affirms, is the pattern and the final word about life.

Somehow, we have lost sight of this. Somehow we are plagued with an insufficient joy in our lives. For many religion is the organized denial of human spontaneity, human feeling, human freedom. A lot of *shall nots*.

But remember, Jesus said: "I have come to bring life and bring it abundantly." Unfortunately, for many this *life* becomes spiritual poverty and intellectual narrowness. Somewhere along the way, the straightforward joy of the Christian faith has been lost to many.

Jesus came preaching a joyful message. Jesus came preaching that there is love for us, love without qualification or limit. Jesus came preaching that what God has in mind for us is a banquet, a wedding, a party, the celebration of light even in the face of darkness.

We are here this morning for all sorts of reasons. But most of us, I would guess, are here—in part—because we are looking for something.

We are looking for something simple in the midst of life's overwhelming complexities;

. . . we are looking for something that will affirm our feeling that life has meaning and direction and purpose;

. . . we are looking for a light that no darkness can quench.

Simplicity and affirmation and light. It's all right here.

Not one of us need leave this house without tasting the joy that is Gods gift to us in Christ's gospel.

Do you suppose that they will say of us, "*They are the happy ones?*"