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It Starts with a Wedding...
John 2:1-11

One of the joys of ministry is getting to be part of the major transitions in people's lives: The tender first few days when a baby is born and sometimes, their baptism; the tender last days before someone dies and their funeral or memorial service. And, sometimes, the joy of a wedding. I had a colleague sum up our work, somewhat callously, as "hatch, match, dispatch."

I met with a bride and groom on Thursday, a sweet couple who plans to marry here in March. He's a doctor, she's a nurse practitioner. They're very organized, and they have a harmonious relationship – they do not anticipate any conflict or drama at their ceremony. I hope they're right.

But seems to me there's always something. With so many details and human unpredictability, something is bound to go wrong.

The last wedding I officiated, the best man overindulged before the ceremony... so much so that he had to be corralled in my office with me and a Baptist preacher to keep an eye on him.

I've officiated a wedding in a barn in the middle of a hurricane, where all the guests got marooned at the reception because of flooding. And there was a wedding that was supposed to take place under a sweet arch of flowers on a lakeshore in Wisconsin – except there was torrential rain all day. The bride got so upset about the weather that she would only talk to her mother, and she kept postponing the ceremony in the hope that the weather would clear.

When I officiated my cousin's wedding, she wanted her little dachshund Frank to be part of the ceremony. For some reason, despite her four siblings, Dary was charged with keeping track of Frank – who kept slipping his collar and making a mad dash toward freedom.

And then there is the wedding at Cana, where the wine runs out halfway through the festivities. This is a faux pas that surely would've been embarrassing for the couple and their families – wedding celebrations were

lengthy affairs in the first century, stretching over several days. Guests brought food and wine to contribute to the feast, so by bringing the lack of wine to Jesus' attention, it's possible Mary is just helping him contribute his fair share to the feast.

But Jesus does more than that. He generates a lavish gift that astounds the steward and reveals God's power in the midst of the party. Sometimes – not every time, but sometimes - when something goes wrong, it makes space for the Spirit's surprising and creative work. At the wedding a few months ago, the drunken best man gave an uninhibited heartfelt tribute to his brother the groom. The bride's worrying couldn't stop the rain at that wedding in Wisconsin, but we gathered her guests under a tent, uncles and aunts and friends and family crowded closely around the couple, making the ceremony much more intimate than it would've been on the lakeshore, with the support of the couple's community palpable as we stood shoulder to shoulder in a semicircle around them. And my cousin's escaping dachshund inspired me to embrace a firm "no pets" rule for future ceremonies... or at least, no pets that my beloved husband is responsible for.

We are in the season of Epiphany, the Sundays between Christmas and the beginning of Lent. It's a season where Christ's identity is unfolded and revealed bit by bit each week. First, we meet the Christ child who the wise ones travel from afar to worship. Then, Jesus the son of God, baptized and anointed by the Spirit. Now, through the gospel of John, we meet Jesus the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth; Jesus, who with a word, turns water into wine.

Now, it's interesting to note that Epiphany, January 6, was when the Greeks celebrated the Feast of Dionysus, a God who it was rumored could turn water into wine. There is an Egyptian God with the same superpower who was celebrated around that time of year, as well. Some speculate that those traditions inspired John to include this story in his gospel – or maybe that's why Jesus performed the miracle in the first place. It's a story that leaves us with more questions than it does answers... but that may be part of its appeal.

In John's gospel, Jesus's miracles are called signs. Now sometimes signs are straightforward: STOP. ONE WAY. Other times, signs are ambiguous or have layers of meaning. If you walked in the double red doors today, you may have noticed the green tips of daffodils poking their heads up through

the pine straw in front of the courtyard. It's an unusual sight here in mid-January, but it's a sure sign that spring is coming despite the freezing temperatures. But that's not all. The daffodil bulbs came from our former church secretary, Edi Neikirk, who dug them out of her front yard a few years ago and brought them to church. Then, Jessica Germany and Su Reid-St. John and maybe a few others planted the bulbs on a church work day. So when I see those daffodils start to come up, they're not just a sign of spring for me. They're a sign of love. A sign of the folks who love this church, who care enough to spend a Saturday with their knees on the ground and their hands in the dirt to plant those bulbs in the first place.

In John's gospel, Jesus' signs have layers of meaning - they reveal something central about who Jesus is and what he came to do. Each sign Jesus performs – turning water into wine, healing the man born blind, feeding the 5000, raising Lazarus from the dead – points beyond itself to reveal more and more of Christ's identity: God in our midst as the light of the world or the bread of life. So what does this first sign reveal? What are we to make of it?

It is significant to me that this first sign is done at a wedding. It doesn't happen on a mountaintop, away from civilization. It doesn't happen in the temple or in the palace of the king. Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding, his whole ministry starts at a wedding – right in the middle of a family celebration, right at the heart of the human experience, where commitments are made, and love is affirmed and the ties that bind us together as family are celebrated. Our God takes on flesh and shows up in the midst of the party to pour out grace abundantly, to make sure that everyone's cup is full. To me, this sign says that relationships matter to God – love, family, friendship, community that celebrates and supports each other – God blesses our relationships. In and through relationship, we find and experience the miracle of God's abundant grace and divine love.

What a strange and wonderful story! Water into wine! And not just a glass of water. This is no parlor trick. Six stone jars of water filled to the brim become 600 gallons of fine wine! By one account, that may have been more than 1000 bottles! But this sign isn't done in front of all the wedding guests. The bride and groom don't know where the wine came from. Only Jesus's mother and the servants know a miracle has happened. So this sign tells me that sometimes God works behind the scenes, in subtle but miraculous ways.

God uses unexpected, ordinary people to surprise us with abundance when we have resigned ourselves to hope for very little and expect even less.

There is a poem, a wedding toast, written by Richard Wilbur, that alludes to this passage. He writes of this miracle:

It made no earthly sense, unless to show
 How whatsoever love elects to bless
 Brims to a sweet excess
 That can without depletion overflow.

Which is to say that what love says is true;
 That this world's fullness is not made but found.
 Life hungers to abound
 And pour its plenty out for such as you.¹

Our friends at the First Presbyterian Church in Wetumpka are worshipping in a depot this morning, after their 150 year-old sanctuary was levelled by a tornado yesterday afternoon. The wreckage is heartbreaking. Such destruction could make a congregation sit back in despair of all that they had that has been lost. But I watched a video this morning of the pastor, Jonathan Yarboro, picking his way through the wreckage with his great big upright bass and his guitar, which survived the storm unscathed. He yelled out, "God is good!" to which we say, "all the time."

This world's fullness is not made but found... life hungers to abound, and pour its plenty out for such as you.

I believe the miracle of Cana calls us to trust God's grace and embrace God's abundance even when our barrels run dry, even when life's storms threaten to overtake us, that even in the wreckage we can find signs of life that lead us to say, "God is good." Let our faith be such that all our water tastes of Cana's wine.

¹ Wilbur, Richard, "Wedding Toast," qtd. by Robin Bates, Better Living through Beowulf, betterlivingthroughbeowulf.com, 1/20/13.