

“Beginning With a Wedding”  
Isaiah 62: 1 – 5          John 2: 1 – 11  
Rev. Wayne E. Gustafson, D.Min.  
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As we move through the church season of Epiphany, we are exploring the beginnings of Jesus’ ministry. As I expect you already know, each of the Gospel accounts relates the life of Jesus somewhat differently. There is a good deal of overlap in the content, but the order of events can be radically different. Furthermore, each of the Gospel writers appears to write the story of Jesus for the benefit of a particular audience. Because there is some editorial license taken by the gospel writers, we can learn a lot about the underlying beliefs concerning Jesus by observing the way they set the order of the events. Today we are looking at John’s account of the beginnings of Jesus ministry. In the Gospel of John, we can see that he gets right down to business. There are no birth stories at all; no wise men, no trips to Egypt, and no pre-adolescent forays into the temple. John begins with the well-known and incredibly beautiful theological statement of the coming of Christ, as “the light,” into the world. Then after a brief account of Jesus’ baptism and the call of the disciples, John takes us directly to a wedding where Jesus is one of the guests. How interesting!

As we have often seen, there can be many layers of meaning in the specific events of Jesus life and ministry. The most traditional way of looking at this particular story considers only the miracle of turning the water into wine. In addition to seeing this as a demonstration of Jesus power, we can also easily see the metaphor of changing water to wine as representing the transformation of the world by means of Jesus’ presence. As valid as these understandings might be, they do not say anything about why John thought to put this story first in his account of Jesus’ life and ministry.

So, let’s think about this. Doesn’t Jesus have more serious business to attend to at the beginning of his ministry? Shouldn’t he be healing people or preaching good news or doing something more Messiah-like? Why a wedding? John says that this is the first of Jesus signs, revealing his glory, and that it causes the disciples to believe in him, but even that explanation does not really address the question. That meaning would be legitimate wherever the story was found in the order of events.

Let’s make the assumption that John puts this story first because there is something significant about a wedding. Perhaps we can look at it in this way. Marriage has always been a powerful symbol in describing the relationship between God and the people. For example, in the Old Testament book of Hosea, God instructs Hosea, the prophet, to marry Gomer, who is, shall we say, a “fallen woman.” This marriage is seen as God’s way of demonstrating the power of God’s freely given love over any and all of our human shortcomings. In many ways marriage represents transformation, too. And it evokes ideas of fidelity, trustworthiness, hope, and the redeeming power of the future through children. When God enters into a covenantal relationship like marriage with humans, we are surrounded by love and trust. In another place in the Gospels when Jesus confronts the Pharisees about divorce, he calls these powerful men to account, reminding them of the vows they have taken and the responsibilities they assume when they enter into relationships. He is telling them to treat their wives as persons, not property. Marriage

stands as the epitome of intimate encounter between persons. So it stands as the symbol of God's loving commitment to us.

With these perspectives in mind, John's decision to put this Wedding story at the beginning starts to make some compelling sense. We might say that in Jesus, God is demonstrating a new quality of intimate relationship with humanity. This divine-human relationship is based on the same kinds of vows and commitments that we would find in marriage vows and commitments. According to John, Jesus' ministry begins with a time of celebration, because this new marriage, this new depth of relationship between humans and God, is a most welcome event. Just as two people become one in marriage, so the divine and human become one. And Jesus, the epitome of the divine-human relationship, becomes the living invitation to each of us to experience that same intimate relationship with God.

With that foundational idea, the miracle of water turned into wine becomes much richer. Not only are we held in the most intimate relationship with the divine, promising us a meaningful life, but we are, as previously noted, also transformed by the experience

You have heard me say many times that without the promise of some kind of transformation, participating in the life of the church is really not worth the effort. It is this promise of transformation that makes a community of faith fundamentally different from other kinds of organizations. This process of transformation even relates to the notion of being "born again." The promise given includes a change that is so fundamental that we almost seem to become different persons.

Let's remember that we humans sometimes have a hard time looking beyond our own self-interest - beyond what is only good for ourselves. Jesus invites us to move beyond self-interest. Through the divine-human relationship that he exemplifies, we see life differently.

So what might change in us? Well, transformation helps us to trust in the divine promises, for example that we do not have to worry; our most basic human needs will be met. We will not be left alone. No matter what happens, God will always be the ground of our being.

And our acceptance of these promises has implications for how we then choose to live. As soon as we are freed from our earlier worries, then our vision can expand. We can then look beyond ourselves and see life more from God's perspective. We can begin to see the quality of the community we are part of and we also become better able to see issues like social justice with clarity. This expanded vision takes us to the other side of our self-interest. We become transformed, as individuals, families, and congregations into citizens of the Kingdom of God.

The wedding celebration and the transformation process, symbolized by water into wine, are ongoing. Whenever we think we have experienced the best that God has to offer, life provides new opportunities for healing and growth. In the present life of this church, given the increased demands so many of our families face, we could conceivably succumb to the temptation of getting caught up only in feelings of anger or desperation. That emotional response comes primarily from our self-interest. While human emotions in response to outward conditions are perfectly understandable and legitimate, they represent only part of the picture. The hope of our

divine transformation into more responsive participants in the kingdom of God makes up the rest.

Just because things will probably not be the same as they were before does not mean that we should despair. Divine transformation always comes with surprises. What is left behind opens up the space for what is to come. A favorite saying of mine (that you might have heard me use before) is from an ancient Sufi source: “When my heart cries for what it has lost, my soul rejoices for what it has found.” I predict that while we may be disturbed by some of the inevitable and unpredictable changes, we will also find much cause for rejoicing.

The process of divine transformation is perpetual, so I assume that this time in the life of the church is just as transformational as any other. The ministry of this church is becoming something new. We don’t know exactly what it will look like and we don’t know what we will have to let go of to get it. But our faith tells us, and this story of the Wedding at Cana affirms, that our water is in the process of being changed into wine. We believe that whatever this church becomes will be good and that it will be better able to respond to the needs of the wider community.

This, then is the message of the Gospel of John. The Wedding at Cana symbolizes the good news for all humankind. There will surely be times of loss and suffering in Jesus’ life and in our lives. But, we begin with a wedding. So may the celebration begin.