

THE TOAST

Celebrating Through Tough Times

Text: John 2:1-11

I

Have you noticed how many normal celebrations have been challenged in some way by this COVID crisis? Raise your hand if you know of a shower or a birthday or a wedding or a graduation or an anniversary or the celebration of somebody's life that had to be cancelled or postponed or shrunk down or Zoomed-in because of this blasted virus?

Raise both hands if it happened to you! I am SO sorry about that and I am in that with you. I'm sitting in a place where there used to be a lot of great celebrations I really enjoyed. It's pretty lonely here today. I'm not doing a lot of weddings over here right now. I'm not doing a lot of baptisms over here. And that adds to the sadness and frustration that has often weighed me down during this season. Maybe you too.

Do you know that Jesus did his first miracle in the midst of a frustrated celebration? True story. In John chapter 2 we read that **On the third day** -- presumably the third after Jesus began his public ministry -- **a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee (John 2:1)**. By the way -- fun fact -- do you know that this ROCK I'm touching is FROM the town of Cana in Galilee? Yep, it is! I often wonder if it was there anywhere near the wedding the Bible tells us about. In any event, we're told that **Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding (John 2:1-2)**. It was about a nine mile walk from Nazareth where Jesus' public ministry had started but I'm guessing they were happy to make a serious hike to attend a wedding. Why? Because weddings were festivals of food and song and dancing that often lasted for a week and involved the whole community.

Which could get expensive! And, in those days, the groom paid the bill, not the bride's family. The groom's hope, of course, was that the guests who came would have such a good time that the experience would seal his fine reputation, enhance his business relationships, and put him in a much better position to provide for his family. His worst nightmare -- like that of many a host even now -- was the possibility that his party supplies might actually run out before the band had stopped playing. It would be a social disgrace that could haunt a couple for the rest of their lives.

And that is exactly what happened at this wedding in Cana -- much to the chagrin of not only the host, but also of a compassionate family friend named Mary. The scriptures say that **When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother of Jesus said** to her son -- no doubt with grave concern -- **"They have no more wine" (John 2:3)**. And **Jesus replied, "Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come" (John 2:4)**. Jesus is saying, in effect, "Mom, I hadn't planned to pull my cape and superpowers so early in my ministry." Indeed, nor would it be until much later that Jesus would pour out the wine of salvation from the cup of his own life.

But Mary knew something about her son that the end of the story reveals to us. So **His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."** Now, **Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now**

draw some out, and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine.

He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said to him, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now" (John 2:5-10).

II

Now, for all my friends who usually attend here at our Butterfield campus, I want to admit that this Scripture you've just heard has been the subject of some very different interpretations. The Napa Valley Version says that any God who would serve up what equates here to be between 120 and 180 gallons of the finest wine can't be all that bad. The Temperance Society Version maintains that it was the custom in those days to mix one part wedding wine to three parts water in order to make it last a whole week.

The Church Lady Version says that Jesus wasn't trying to help anyone have fun, he was just trying to prove how powerful HE was -- a little hard to buy when you consider Jesus' words about it not yet being his time to do that.

Want to know what I believe the Bible is really saying? I think the message is this:

Jesus has a special place in his heart for people whose resources have run out. When someone's love has been poured out till there's nothing left... When someone's hope for the future has been drained to the last drop... When someone's supply of courage or physical strength has trickled away... Jesus doesn't just shrug his shoulders. He doesn't walk away in search of a cheerier partymate. On the contrary, Jesus comes alongside us and works to restore our ability to celebrate. Jesus shows us that far from being the celestial Scrooge some people picture God to be, Christ's Father is the God of good news, of joyful renewal, in short -- the God of celebration.

Do you know why I say that with such confidence? It's because what Jesus did near that rock at Cana was not an exception. Think about it. Why do you suppose that so many of the gospel accounts of encounters between Jesus and people occur at dinner parties? Why did Jesus seem to prefer the company of broad-grinning fishermen to pinched-face Pharisees? Why, when his disciples wanted him to send away the 5,000 thousand people who'd come to listen to him, did Jesus insist on first putting on a good bread and fish feed for them all? It is because at the heart of God is an embracing, free, and generous joy. Jesus' teachings tell us that too. He speaks of all the angels of heaven rejoicing when even one soul turns to God (Luke 15:10). He says that God is like a parent who throws a huge party when a wayward child comes home (Luke 15:10). My Father in heaven is like a King who laid on a terrific banquet for people, and whose greatest disappointment was that the people he's invited don't have the good sense to know the joyful blessings they are missing (Luke 14:16-23). This is how God feels toward you and me.

III

When I talk about how joyful Jesus was, don't get me wrong. I don't think he likes the "Don't worry, be happy" gospel some people preach. Jesus would not gloss over the tough times some of us are going through right now. The Bible shows us how honestly and seriously Jesus takes the pain and the sin, the addictions and the losses of life. He knew from his own experience what it was to be down among the dregs of Life's Cup.

But, remember, what makes certain wines particularly valuable is that they have these bubbles that, even when under pressure at the bottom of the glass, stubbornly refuse to pop... and perseveringly rise up... till they burst through the surface tension. The kind of joy Jesus lived with was like those champagne bubbles. It just kept rising. It

kind of joy Jesus lived with was like those champagne bubbles. It just kept rising... it just kept filling the world with a grace that triumphs over the gravity of life.

That's why on the eve of his execution, when he knew full well the agony that the next 24 hours held for him, Jesus nonetheless called his disciples together around a table. I know that we often picture it as a somber occasion. We assume that everyone had those pained expressions of saintly misery we see in all those medieval paintings, and too often in churches. But I don't think it was truly that way. You know why? It's because of what Jesus said on that night. Luke records that he said: **I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer (Luke 22:15)**. In other words, I know I can't avoid suffering, but I will still take this opportunity to celebrate with the people I love.

The Apostle John tells us that Jesus then went on to say: You know this way of life I've been teaching you? Well, **I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete (John 15:11) Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn... but your pain will turn into joy [one day] (John 16:20) and No one will be able to take your joy from you (John 16:22)**. Will you ponder those promises for a moment?

IV

Right now, our world needs to discover reasons for joy. A lot of people are drinking from the cup of bitterness, resentment or hatred toward others – sometimes even believing that's the Creator's cup. It's not. Some are drinking excessively from the cup of selfish pleasure, not realizing that they are poisoning themselves. Others still see little cause to raise a glass at all. What's your condition today?

If Jesus is living in and through you, part of what you'll be doing – even in these tough times -- is finding reasons to celebrate God's grace bubble up and burst through the surface of your life – as they did in Jesus' life? ***What do you have to celebrate?*** I came across an op-ed article in the *Wall Street Journal* some time ago that said: *"Most of us miss out on life's big prizes. The Pulitzer. The Nobel. Oscars. Tonys. Emmys. But we're eligible for life's small pleasures. A pat on the back. A kiss behind the ear. A four-pound bass. A full moon. An empty parking space. A crackling fire. A great meal. A glorious sunset. Hot soup. Cold beer. Don't fret about copping life's grand awards. Enjoy its tiny delights. There are plenty for all of us."* Even in this time.

In the middle of one spring afternoon, when our oldest child was three, I popped a cork on a bottle of Martinelli's sparkling apple juice and poured each of us a glass. We tsat down in our den together and I taught him how to clink glasses and make a toast. We raised a glass to the fun he had with his toy cars and trucks, to how much he loved candy, and to the fact that God had made a world where there were so MUCH candy! We toasted to Mom and his fuzzy blanket, to his nursery school friends, and to our retriever, Bonny. I wish you could have seen the joy on our boy's face.

One day, I pray, that habit of celebration will mature much further. One day, by God's grace, my sons will understand enough to raise a glass with me and make a toast to the One who is the source of all these simple blessings. I hope they'll celebrate the simple reality that they even got an invitation to this party biologists call LIFE. I pray they'll toast the Creator of this Universe who so loved the world that He changed his own blood into the wine of salvation for us all. I desperately hope that each of my children - - and you or yours -- will be cheered by the truth that even if they or someone they love faces a terrible cross, God still has the power to raise them up to new life.

I want to begin to model that sort of joyful gratitude more and more – maybe especially in these hard times. And I hope YOU do too. Please pray with me...

Lord God, as you gather us together across time and space, renew in us the joyful wonder that spilled from the lips of those awestruck servants in Cana long ago.

Awaken in us a deeper awareness of the overflowing grace that you have poured out for us, and a deeper delight at the recognition that YOU are at this party with us. May our words, thoughts, and deeds in days ahead be like the pure toasts of children who know how good they have it, how greatly they are loved, and how right it is in every way and day-by-day to give thanks. In Jesus' name. Amen.