

(Since we had a guest speaker this past Sunday, here is an old sermon from Pastor Jason's files:)

Believe it or not, pastoral wisdom amassed through the years suggests that *weddings are accidents waiting to happen*. Lest you think me wrong, I'd point your attention to a television show which capitalizes on this conventional wisdom. They set up cameras at weddings waiting for things to go awry. If the number of episodes they've filmed are any indication, it seems as though they're rarely disappointed. When Nat and I got married, this wisdom played itself out...that's for sure. I've got a couple of really wonderful nephews. I asked the oldest to be our ring bearer; he was about 7 at the time. Now this is a young man with, well, he's got a lot of energy. Knowing this, my sister made sure that our rings were really well tied to the pillow that he was going to carry. That way, there was little chance he'd lose them before his big moment in the service. But like I said, weddings are accidents waiting to happen. Those rings my sister tied to the little decorative pillow, well, let's just say she tied *them really, really securely*. A double-knot actually, of the "I can't undo this knot-no-matter-what-I-try" variety. I wish y'all could've seen us there during the service as they tried to get those rings off the pillow for us. I'm sure we looked like deer caught in headlights. I remember feeling the warm flush of blood rush to my face in a sense of growing embarrassment as I looked out into the pews and realized we were at a standstill. No matter how hard we tried, the rings weren't coming off.

Thankfully, the pastor marrying us is a bit of a boy scout. Turns out, he had a pocket knife underneath his robe. The next thing I know he's reaching under his robe and pulling out that knife. He cut the rings free from their knots and the rest of the service went off without a hitch. But we had our accident thereby proving the wisdom, sometimes weddings *are* just accidents waiting to happen.

As we enter the scripture reading today, that conventional wisdom seems to carry all the way back in time, right there to Cana. Jesus is there, along with the disciples, attending the wedding party. Now keep in mind, back then, wedding celebrations weren't half-hour long affairs followed by a brief reception. Back in Jesus' day, weddings were a full out, 7 day-long extravaganzas of hospitality.

Think about that for a moment. For any of you who've planned weddings, just imagine if you had to plan for a week-long party. What are the logistics you'd have to figure out? Where is Aunt Betty going to sleep? What do we serve for breakfast on day four or dinner on day seven? Can you even *imagine* the work required to come up with that many seating charts? I shudder to think about it...

And if weddings are the places where accidents happen, then can you imagine the embarrassment the family at Cana must've been feeling *when the wine runs out*? I'll bet when they found out they'd bought too little vino, they were just hanging their heads in shame. I imagine they just knew people would be talking about it behind their backs for the rest of their lives. As the wineskins ran dry, the family at Cana would've known all their serious planning had to come to naught.

Now I don't know if you're anything like me, but sometimes celebrations can be the most stress-producing things of all. When we've got guests coming over, I think both Nat and I are striving to make sure that everything goes perfectly. So, we plan. Who'll clean up? Who'll get the groceries? How much food should we fix? We get serious about things and, well, let's just say, it isn't always the most enjoyable time. And I don't think it's just us. Think back on Christmas time. My guess is even amidst the joy of it all, there was also the accompanying stress and anxiety.

*The truth of the matter is sometimes we're so worried about what'll go wrong we miss out on the beauty of the moment. We're so busy figuring out contingency plans, so preoccupied with the "what ifs," that we don't just enjoy the day we're in. And sometimes I wonder if our entire society isn't set up along the premise "life itself is an accident waiting to happen."* So, we keep our guard up.

Individually and as a society, it seems as though we're always waiting for the next shoe to drop. And since the next calamity is probably right around the corner, there just isn't any time to have fun. *We'd better get serious*. And I don't mean to trivialize life. There are things we're gonna encounter that *are* challenging. But if anything, American society has this uncanny ability to make *everything*, even the most fun and joyous times, *dreadfully serious*. Just think about it, we live in an age where parents *routinely* get into fights while their children are playing sports. Shows depicting the stress of weddings thrive in the ratings. 24 hour news networks profit from our obsessive worry, providing us with scenes of all the potential calamities out there waiting to happen. Drinking in this culture, I think

we all take ourselves a little too seriously. We worry what's out there. We worry what other people think of us. And so we adopt a grave and serious manner.

I ran across a thought by pastoral care thinker Edward Friedman recently I think makes sense of it all. In the book, Friedman suggests "seriousness" is the tone of anxiety. By that he means that when we get overly worried or stressed or anxious about something, then the demeanor we take on is one of "seriousness." I don't think he's far off the mark.

Think about it, when you're stressed or worried or anxious about something, what's your outward manner most like? If you're anything like me, you get "SERIOUS."

You see, we've become a society preoccupied with seriousness in some ways because we're looking at life believing that the next accident is just out there waiting. As if the wine that's flowing freely now is just a few scant moments from running out and we've got nothing in reserve.

And so too often we ask ourselves "When will the next shoe drop?" and "How can I be prepared to minimize its impact?" Over time, those become the foundational questions of our lives. And the youngest among us are certainly bearing the burdens of our overly-serious world. Recent reports show that young people are suffering from much, much higher rates of depression than ever before. And who could blame them? We've inculcated them with worries which far eclipse their years.

I was talking to a parent back when I worked at Starbucks. I noted her stress level and asked her if she was all right. She told me she was just about to have a very *serious* talk with her child. She went on to tell me her daughter's grades just weren't where they were supposed to be. She was planning to tell her daughter that with grades like she was getting, she could pretty much forget going to a *good* college. The mother told me she hoped the caramel Frappuccino she was buying for her would help her handle the message. Now how old do you guess this girl was? Imagine my surprise when bounding into the store came *the woman's fifth grade daughter*.

And I think it's far too often the case we carry this overly serious outlook into our faith-lives as well. Believe me, we Presbyterians aren't above the fray, just look at our Book of Order. W-1.4001 states "disorderly worship is an offense to God." Do you see? This worship stuff it's *serious* business. Make a mistake and you've offended God Himself. No wonder we're called the "frozen chosen" by outsiders. After all, we don't want anything to go wrong during worship, do we?

You know sometimes we take our worship or our prayers or our studying of Scripture so seriously that it seems to become disconnected with the world around us. We want desperately to "Get it" that we approach these holy places and pages with an anxiety which cuts us off from the joy they've been created to give us. Who hasn't started reading the Bible only to find themselves discouraged after a few pages? "I don't get it," we think, and somehow come away from the experience more stressed-out than we were to begin with. Who hasn't begun a prayer so seriously that, in our well-meaning attempts to remain "proper," whatever that means, we end up getting snared in the language and fail to share our innermost thoughts with God? Who hasn't come to a worship service, maybe not here, but at another church and become so preoccupied with not knowing their way of doing things that we weren't so much uplifted as embarrassed? Perhaps more tellingly, I wonder who hasn't begun a day so preoccupied with what could go wrong that the entire 24 hours slid by without the faintest whiff of joy or happiness?

Turning water into wine is *the first* of seven miracles that Jesus is going to perform in the Gospel of John. From this point forward in the Gospel, Jesus is going to be doing all sorts of amazing things. Oh, and because this is the first of his miracles, there's whole lot of scholarly material to wade through, all of which opens the door on wonderful sermons. You can talk about the eschatological meaning of saving the best wine for last. You can talk about the intervention of Jesus' mom. You can preach about a million serious, studious wonderful sermons. I'm sure if it be God's will for you and I to remain at this church through the years then you're gonna hear every one of those sermons.

But today I want us just see *where* Jesus is and *what* Jesus does because I think it's something we too often overlook in our overly-serious, anxiety-filled lives. *Sometimes I'm afraid we in the church forget that our Lord "once attended a wedding celebration, turned water into wine. Jesus said YES to gladness. Yes to joy. Yes to merriment."* Think about that for a moment.

The Lord our God, walked into a wedding feast and when the wineskins started running dry, He miraculously filled huge stone jars with wine to keep the party going. Oh, and those jars He filled with wine? They were the vessels used to hold water for the very serious, very grave business of ritual purification. Jesus turns that water, water that couldn't even be touched by human hands, He turns it into wine to be enjoyed in order to keep the celebration afloat. What was meant for the serious business of appeasing God was transformed into the spirit by which a wedding party continued.

Could it be that in our worry and stress we've missed out that we worship a God that *wants us to be joyful*? **The entirety of Jesus' life shows us that our Lord doesn't want any part of our lives so serious or so holy not to be enjoyed.**

Consider this – Jesus Christ spent most of His earthly ministry celebrating with people. He helped a wedding party go off without a hitch. He cured people of diseases and deformities. He ate meals with people, sinners and Pharisees alike. Throughout it all, as Robert Brearly notes, “Jesus carried a spirit of celebration with Him wherever He went as He proclaimed a God of mercy and peace and joy. The joyous feast at Cana is still a sign to the church that we are to rejoice in God and are to toast the world with the amazing good news of Grace!”

I want to tell you about what I considered until this week to be the worst sermon I ever heard. I heard it back when I was a student at Duke Divinity. In case y'all didn't know this, it's hard to find a crowd of more anxious, fear-filled folks than seminarians. Now one of the great advantages of Duke Divinity is all the world-class minds they have teaching there. In the course of hearing these great teachers pontificate and given our natural inclination towards being worried about the future, it's easy to become quite enamored of the seriousness of God. Following closely from that, I, along with a great many of my classmates, began to believe the best sermons were the ones that could draw in Kierkegaard, Barth, Augustine and Calvin or some collection of great minds that made Christianity worth being a part of. And then I ended up one Sunday morning for worship at a small Methodist church through my internship. Just that same week I'd heard the Rev. Dr. Geoffrey Wainwright, world-class theologian, deliver a sermon on the Wedding at Cana. As it would turn out, it was the same passage this Methodist pastor was preaching that Sunday morning. I remember sitting in the pew getting excited by the prospect of “getting serious about this piece of Scripture.” And then that Methodist pastor got up to deliver his message. He began behind the pulpit but quickly moved away from it. “Wait, that's not right.” I thought. “That's not how it's done. He's not being serious.” His message consisted largely of him simply repeating “it's a party, we're going to a party with Jesus. Are you ready?” “It's a party” he said. “And it's right now. It's a party. And it's never going to end. We're gonna have a good time.” It's a shame my overly-serious, overly-anxious divinity school conditioned mind couldn't make sense of his message. *I look back on that sermon and shudder to think of what I missed.* That pastor was helping us remember that God-in Christ came and lived and breathed and walked among us. And He considered it important to make sure that the celebration at Cana continued. He performed the first of his miracles to make sure that it would. The pastor of that small Methodist church wanted us to remember the same Lord Jesus Christ that was with those wedding guests at Cana is here with us by the Power of the Holy Spirit.

The Jesus who was the life of the party then is the life of the party now. And because He's with us, the lives we lead are to be celebrations. And we've got great cause to party don't we?

Robert Hochkins writes “We Christians ought to be celebrating constantly. We ought to be preoccupied with parties, banquets, feasts and merriment. We ought to give ourselves over to the rapture of joyousness because through Jesus Christ we've been liberated from the fear of death AND FROM THE MORE IMMEDIATE FEAR OF LIFE.” Can you imagine your life along these terms? That this existence isn't supposed to be a veil of tears nor a time of trial nor is it to be filled with fears and anxieties. Life isn't an accident waiting to happen! Rather this life presents to us the opportunity for an epic celebration of living in God's eternal love.

Try it this week. As you go about your life, consider this entire world is wrapped in God's most tender embrace. So, relax a little. Let go of your fears, if even for a moment. Don't worry about the past, it's over. Don't stress over what you think other people think of you. Don't fret about the future.

Our gracious host loves you. And He's thought of everything ahead of time. When something runs out, He'll make sure it soon flows as freely as that wine in Cana. The party has started my friends! Enjoy it!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.