

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
January 26, 2025

The Life of the Church

John 2:1-11

One person tells about how he and his wife were explaining to their three-year-old son how much Jesus loves him. He asked the little boy if he knew where Jesus lived, assuming he might say something like, "In my heart," or "In heaven." But he thought about it and said, "He lives in the basement." That's where the family stored its nativity scene.

I'm assuming that by now you've packed away your nativity set, though I'll admit, we still have a small Christmas tree set up in the corner of our basement. I still plug it in each time I go down to watch TV late at night. It adds a nice warm glow to the space, and keeps me from treating the incarnation as just a theological concept that can be boxed up and stored away until the holidays roll around again.

In the opening chapters of his Gospel, John takes the incarnation, and rather than packing it away, begins unpacking it, so that we can see and hear and touch and taste the significance of the Word made flesh. Through Jesus' words, and especially through his deeds, the glory of God will be revealed, will shine forth with greater and greater brightness.

In today's text, we hear about the first miraculous act of Jesus' public ministry. Now note that here in John's Gospel, Jesus' opening miracle doesn't involve healing the sick, feeding the hungry, or raising the dead. The location isn't a hospital, a homeless shelter, or a cemetery. No, according to John, Jesus kicks things off with a sign performed at a wedding reception hall. Just when it looks like the flow of wine has run dry, Jesus intervenes, with some encouragement from his mother, and transforms water into wine, injecting life back into the party.

Of course this wouldn't be the first time that a marriage celebration has been disrupted by the unexpected. Where would YouTube or America's Funniest Home Videos be without that steady flow of footage of wedding mishaps. The drunken relative who gets out of hand on the dance floor and accidentally knocks over the buffet table. Or the best man whose toast rambles on into surprising revelations about the groom's previous girlfriends. Or the DJ who's frantically troubleshooting his equipment because the time has come for the first dance and instead of music there's dead silence. Or the child who's darting all over the reception hall after having an extra piece of sugary cake and one more glass of punch.

Or one of the worst wedding nightmares of all—guests standing in the buffet line, staring down at empty pans because you've run out of food. Nothing drains the life out of a party like empty stomachs. Or in today's Scripture passage, empty glasses. That's because the wedding wine was more than just a way of satisfying your thirst or washing down your food. Wine was essential to the party's life and vitality. Without wine, an atmosphere overflowing with energy and excitement would turn into a desolate gathering of disappointed relatives and friends. The sound of tambourines and flutes would be replaced by the sound of chirping crickets.

But just when it looks like the festivities will come to a halt, Jesus takes what was on the verge of death and infuses it with new life. He performs a miracle that guarantees the party will continue, not just for a few more hours but probably a few more days. Remember that in that day and time, weddings typically lasted a week. So Jesus knows that a quick fix won't do. There needs to be an abundance of wine, which is exactly what he provides. And not just the cheap stuff. Contrary to the typical pattern, which meant serving the better wine while the guests could still taste what they were drinking, Jesus saves the best for last.

Konstantin Makovskii was a prominent Russian painter during the 19th century. He once painted an enormous picture depicting a wedding feast. The bride is standing, and the guests are holding out their cups toward her. According to the explanation with the painting, the guests are shouting, "Gor'ko! Gor'ko!", which means, "Bitter! Bitter!" The shouts are in reference to the wine, which had turned bitter. Much like our wedding custom of tapping on glasses, Russian custom says the newlywed couple must kiss in order to make the wine sweet again.¹

Instead of going from the bitter to the sweet, Jesus starts out with the sweetest wine, the best wine. And his first miracle deals not only in quality but also quantity. He doesn't just provide better than what was expected. He also provides more than was expected.

So now you can feel the party coming back to life. You can see folks who were lingering in the parking lot starting to drift back into the reception hall. You can hear the noise level in the room starting to rise as guests resume their conversations. You can see the DJ trying to wake his laptop from sleep mode. You can see friends and relatives starting to return to the dance floor. There's still plenty of celebrating to do, plenty of joy to share, plenty of gladness to spread.

Here in John's Gospel, Jesus' first miraculous sign is an act of plenty. He sets his ministry in motion with a deed of abundance. That's because Jesus has come to bring life, to the brim. In John's Gospel, Jesus speaks repeatedly of how he has come to provide life. "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (10:10). Where Jesus is present, eternal life, life from God, is present. And where life from God is present, joy and gladness are present.

This means that gladness is one of the defining marks of the community of God's people. Not because followers of Jesus are naturally more happy, optimistic, and upbeat than everyone else, but because of what God has done through Christ to save us and make us his own. The grace of God in Christ is what brings aliveness into the midst of our deadness. It's the wine that fills and flows, animating our celebration and energizing our praise.

There's a scene in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* where the character Alyosha is listening to a priest read the story of Jesus' turning water into wine at a wedding. We get to hear his mental commentary: "I love that passage; it's Cana of Galilee, the first miracle. . . . Ah, that miracle! Ah, that sweet miracle! It was not men's grief, but their joy Christ visited. He worked His first miracle to help men's gladness . . . He who loves men loves their gladness, too."²

Christian gladness doesn't mean that we ignore the reality of sin and suffering, in our lives and in the world. We still face these honestly, taking them into full account. But Christian gladness is always, as the theologian Karl Barth put it, a "defiant nevertheless." This means maintaining and cultivating the conviction that though there's much evidence to the contrary, in our lives, in the lives of others, and in the life of the world, nevertheless we still operate on the belief that God's saving sovereignty will prevail and that those who are in Christ will share in God's redeemed and restored world, where his justice and peace will

reign. As the old hymn puts it: "This is my Father's world, / O let me ne'er forget / That though the wrong seems oft so strong, / God is the Ruler yet. / This is my Father's world, / The battle is not done; / Jesus who died shall be satisfied, / And earth and heaven be one."

That isn't a wedding song, but it certainly feeds into the kind of gladness and celebration that Jesus resurrects when he shows up and starts performing signs of the kingdom's presence. In fact, anyone who has tasted the new wine of God's grace in Christ will know that the life of faith isn't meant to be a heavy, gloomy journey of personal striving, or a relentless, 24/7 effort to work up the life that only Jesus can give.

Sometimes we lose sight of the fact that the presence of Jesus, risen and reigning, is what makes us alive as a community of believers. None of us in the family of God are self-generating. We're born of God, born from above. The source of our new life isn't within us, but outside us, beyond us. Eternal life isn't something we manufacture by our own determination and effort. It's sheer grace, sheer gift, available to us in Jesus the Son, to be received and welcomed by faith.

And what's true of us as individual believers is true of us as a community of believers. Our congregation exists and bears fruit not by its own power but by the power of Christ among us. Later in John's Gospel, Jesus tells us that he's the vine and we're the branches. If we want to bear fruit, we have to remain joined to him. "Apart from me you can do nothing" (15:5). So Jesus really is the life of our church. He's the source of our existence. He animates us and empowers us. He makes us who we are and energizes what we do. Without Jesus' presence, we're as good as dead, like a wedding party that has run out of wine.

As God's people, we need to see and hear one another. But we also have to see beyond one another, and through one another, to the one who is the ultimate source of our life together. When we come here on Sunday, we don't come just to meet one another. We come most of all to meet Jesus. Later in John's Gospel, he tells us about some Gentile converts to Judaism who came seeking Jesus. Their request was simple. "Sir, we would see Jesus." That probably means more than just wanting to meet Jesus. The theme of sight also has to do with recognizing the glory of God revealed in Jesus. So to say, "Sir, we would see Jesus" is a profound request. In fact, there have been many pulpits where those very words are posted so that the preacher can see them and remember to magnify Jesus in the sermon. If I stand up here on Sunday morning and serve you the wine of the word, and the only one you see and hear is me, then my ministry isn't in keeping with Jesus' first miracle.

In this miracle, Jesus keeps a fairly low profile. The party host and the groom aren't fully aware of what or who is behind this surplus of wine. But the servants know. They know where it has come from. They know the source of this life-giving liquid. They realize that they're simply handing out what comes from the hands of Jesus. May we be like them. May we see more clearly the life of Jesus that flows into this congregation and through this congregation. May we see more clearly the grace of Jesus that surrounds us and fills us and sustains us. May we see more clearly the one who has been, is now, and always will be the life of this church.

¹ Lee Eclov, at <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2007/july/4072307.html>>.

² Quoted in Mark Galli, "Jesus on the Greatest Party Ever." *The Behemoth* magazine. Issue 13, January 8, 2015. Accessed January 22, 2015 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/behemoth/2015/issue-13/jesus-on-greatest-party-ever.html>>.