

John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

God's Party - January 16, 2022

John 2:1-11

The sermon I am offering today was written last Tuesday. In fact, it was written during the morning and afternoon. Wait! What's up with that? Aren't I supposed to be at my other job, teaching at an elementary school? Well, yes. I was at my job. But in my Special Education classroom there was only one student and three adults. The school secretary had nothing else for me to do because, for a change, we had most of the staff in. However, we're seeing more and more kids missing.

So, after being told specifically that I could do what I pleased, I figured why not write my sermon?

We all know that COVID is taking over so much of daily life. When I asked our leaders if we should be online only this week and next, the replies came almost instantly: yes, stay online! So we stay online only.

I don't know about you, but I've taken a COVID test in the past few weeks. I imagine just about all of us know people who have COVID and others who have possibly been exposed. Fortunately, more people have been vaccinated so that those who have breakthrough infections don't have to go to the hospital. Numbers of cases are skyrocketing, but serious cases are not rising at nearly the same rate.

Nonetheless, we're all tired of this COVID mess. We all hate wearing masks, even though we are strongly advised to do so. This is not fun at all.

It doesn't require much imagination to go back three years to the time of life without COVID. We thought nothing about being in close contact with each other. We could have gatherings of all sorts without having to ask our guests to promise they were vaccinated. Unless you were in the medical profession, you had never heard the word "N-95." Parties were easy, parties were fun, parties took place without fear of getting sick from each other.

In short, that's the kind of party Jesus attended 2000 years ago: a wedding feast in the town of Cana. It's interesting how little traditions have changed over the centuries. Weddings are always occasions for celebrations, aren't they, and people are experts at celebrating. Sure, the dances may have changed and songs we sing are a bit different, but there's always plenty of people, plenty of food, and of course, plenty of wine.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the Presbyterian Church had a reputation of being very opposed to alcohol. We still serve grape juice during communion. Do you recall the name "Carrie

Nation" Carrie was a leader the temperance movement and went around to bars with a hatchet, smashing bottles. She and thousands like her drove the passage the 18th amendment to the constitution banning alcohol and ushering in the country's experiment with Prohibition. Carrie Nation was a Presbyterian.

When I worked in Zambia, Africa, I encountered the interesting situation of many of my Presbyterian pastoral colleagues being strongly discouraged from drinking. Now, Africans know how to make alcoholic beverages and I've sampled a number of interesting concoctions. But when the missionaries arrived in the 1800s, they immediately banned alcohol for Christian converts. Of course, that did not stop the missionaries themselves from imbibing themselves. They just didn't do it in front of the people!

So when I was there, my colleagues knew that I drank alcohol and they allowed me to get away with it because I was an American. Everyone knows Americans are strange. Of course, many of my minister friends would tell me privately that they also drank, but would not dare do so in front of their members.

It's curious, therefore, that this story about Jesus turning water into wine got somehow ignored or glossed over by my African colleagues. Let us be clear, the Greek words, the original language of the New Testament, use the Greek words for wine. They had to. There was no such thing a non-fermented grape juice. You leave grape juice to sit for a few days and it will turn into wine, like it not. In fact, wine was necessary to people's health back then. They often mixed wine with water because, although they didn't know why, water mixed with wine was safer to drink. Wine was a normal part of life in Jesus' time.

Celebrations were normal; wine was normal. Therefore the feast at Cana was perfectly normal and Jesus' being there sends the message loud and clear that God intends for us to enjoy life and living.

It's sad that the church has the reputation of being filled with judgmental, strict, out-of-touch hypocrites that want people to live a separate, sterile, bland existence. Scripture is full of references to the beauty and splendor of God's creation. In the very first chapter of the Bible, God finishes creation and pronounces everything to be very good. The Psalms are filled with praises of God's good creation. Fellowship and gatherings and good food and wine are all part of God's creation and they are meant to be enjoyed. We are created to enjoy each other and all the wonderful things God has made.

I know that in the situation of our church, just like almost every other church, COVID has really devastated us in terms of our fellowship and just plain ability to be a community. We can't meet after worship. We conduct everything via Zoom. It can appear that there is so little humanity between us. One of our core functions as church is to build and strengthen our common life together. Being online is a poor substitute.

Yet, at the same time, we should be grateful that we can, at least, be online. This worship, our meetings and Bible studies -- all of this would have been impossible just a few years ago. I know it's hard visiting online with people we used to see in person. But at least we are able to do that! Our gatherings, our celebrations, may be different from what we have been doing in the past. Nevertheless, we need to be grateful for what we do have and can do. Absolutely we need to look forward to a life without masks, but that is not going to happen for a while. A year ago, we were just starting to roll out vaccines. Now over 70% are vaccinated. Those who choose not to may face severe consequences and yes, they do put the rest of us in danger. On the other hand, it is worth debating on how much mandating authority government should have. Where is that balance between individual choice and the needs of the community?

Tomorrow, friends, as we remember the life of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. the issues of individuality, community, and God's plans for the world come together in a most interesting way. Let me tell you, in some ways, Martin Luther King Day is the absolutely most American holiday we have. Just about every country has Christmas and New Year's and Easter. Most have a form of Thanksgiving, Independence Day, Labor Day, and Veteran's Day. But King Day is different. Tomorrow we remember the life of a man who invoked God and worked within the laws and structures of our nation to spearhead the civil rights movement in our country. King Day honors our assertion that the American experiment in representative democracy really works!

We in the United States like to hold ourselves up to the world as the standard for how representative democracy is supposed to work. We insist that our system ultimately reflects the will of the people and that in our nation justice and equality under the law will eventually prevail. We tell the world, "yes, our system works, follow our lead." One of the missions of the US Peace Corps, of which I was a member, is to spread the idea of democracy at the local level. We taught, and I still believe, that while our country has many problems and our system has many flaws, people can make change through the ballot box and peaceful demonstrates, not violent revolution.

That is not to say that we always accomplish change in this country quietly. Far from it. As Dr. King's own story tragically proves, he died by violence even though he preached and demonstrated non-

violence. Of course, our savior, Jesus, lived a life teaching peace and rejecting violence only to die violently and horribly on a cross.

Is, therefore, violence part of God's plan? Is violence a guest at God's party? Is our COVID infected, unstable, violent, climate-challenged world the way God intends things to be? The answer, of course, is certainly not.

As Christians, we must always be in touch with the reality of our times. Dr. King read the same scriptures as we do and from the book of Genesis concluded that the world under the governance of human beings was a far different place than what God intended. He also concluded that God intended for human beings to move, move, move ever so slowly toward God's plan for the world. God call a group of people called Israel into being so that they might demonstrate how God wants our lives to be lived. At the right time, Jesus came as God in person to take God's plan for the Israelites to the next level -- indeed to the entire world!

The wedding at Cana, fully endorsed by Jesus, is a glimpse of how the world can be: people, sharing friendship, good food and even better wine, altogether! It is a vision of God's intention that we all live together in peace and in harmony enjoying God's creation.

The wedding at Cana is Dr. King's vision for the world. Peace, plenty, equality, joy, fellowship -- all the things every human being craves. He did not experience God's Party as much as he should have because of his race. King, however, dedicated his life so that not just African-Americans, but people of all backgrounds would share in the party equally. The civil rights movement tht King helped advance paved the way for all people: women, LGBT persons, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, and so many others to stand up and say, yes, we too are fully entitled to come to God's Party.

Friends, the simple reality is that within our lifetimes we will not see the promise of God's Party fulfilled in our own country, let alone the entire world. We know, sadly, that so much hatred infects our country, infects our country as surely as COVID is infecting our country. We know that there are many who reject the concept of equal rights, who reject the idea of elections, who reject the idea of objective facts as the basis on which to make decisions. We know that there are many who live their lives in fear, ignorance, and hatred because they cannot and will not embrace God's Party as embraced by Jesus. We have a long way to go.

Yet, we have to keep going. We have to keep testifying to the ideal of God's Party. We have to keep the vision of Dr. King not merely alive but on the forefront of our mission as Christians. We can never let go of the idea that one day, we shall all sit at table together and celebrate our diversity and

celebrate our creativity, and celebrate our glorious existence by enjoying best of God's wonderful creation. Jesus wants all of us, all of us, to keep the party going!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.