THE BEST IS YET TO COME

John 2:1-11

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Have any of you seen the Netflix series; The Chosen, yet? I’ve got to put in a plug for this series. I finally got to watch it the last couple of weeks, and I highly recommend it. When I read this week’s lectionary, and began my research, I realized I have never preached on Jesus’ 1st miracle (or sign as John says); the story of Jesus turning water into wine, (which is only told in the gospel of John). I’m pretty sure we’re all familiar with this story; so I had to ask myself - why I’ve never preached on it? Maybe because my mom never did. Maybe because she didn’t want to touch on this story because she comes from a long lineage of teetotalers, starting with my great-grandfather C.D. Bullock who was a United Methodist Circuit Rider and Temperance Pastor. And so, I know my mom grew up hearing alcohol was bad or evil. I was very aware, while growing up, watching TV at Grandma’s house, and I would hear my grandma get upset seeing someone, like Red Skeleton play acting, as if he were the town drunk. “Oh!” She would spout: “Why do they have to do that?” “It’s just so unnecessary.” It obviously wasn’t comedy, or funny to my grandmother. (And there is usually a reason for that.)

But, in the series; “The Chosen” when they tell the story about Jesus’ 1st miracle, it made a huge impression on me. They really made the story come to life with every little detail. I’ve always known, they drank wine on occasion back then; but I had no idea that wine was such a big part of their lives and celebrations. I’m learning that ever since the world began, wine has been a favorite beverage for meals, parties, and celebrations; and, especially weddings. Wine and weddings have gone hand in hand for centuries. The Bible says in the 104th Psalm verse 15; “that wine is the oil of gladness” specifically: “wine that gladdens human hearts,” Wine, the bible says, brings joy to the party. And we all know people want to be happy at weddings, so it makes sense that they often drink wine. Of course, not my great-grandfathers church nor my grandmothers church, nor my mom’s church. But with those exceptions, (and a few others), people often drink wine at weddings, and this happens throughout the whole world. Wine is a part of the celebration.

The gospel story for today is a Jewish wedding story.  And Jewish weddings in Jesus’ day, were galas; or festive occasions. Back then, weddings usually began on Tuesday nights, when the groom and his friends would walk over to the bride’s house at night, having grand ole time, gathering in front of the bride’s home, she would come out to the front steps, and for the first time she would lift her veil and show how beautiful she was. This was a monumental event. Then, the groom and the groomsmen, would again, walk down the streets swinging their lamps and they would go over to the groom’s house to begin a 7-day party. Yes, you heard that right. So much for our traditional late night bachelor parties today. They really knew how to live. They had 7-day parties. (I am not sure I could keep up.) And during those 7 days, family and friends would bring their gifts, their hot dishes, and their good humor, because they expected to party for days.

And wine was always served. It was Biblical. It was the oil of gladness, a juice that made for joy. Remember, Jews didn’t have a problem with alcohol. Rarely, if ever, do you see a Jewish alcoholic. Probably because they grew up with wine. They learned how to socially drink in moderation. Wine was and is a part of their daily life, therefore, rarely do they become alcoholic.

In the Gospel of John today, Jesus begins his ministry at a wedding reception in Cana. It seems like an odd place for our Lord to begin his earthly ministry. But, for John, what happened there was a sign of what was to come. About nine-miles north of Nazareth, a wedding was taking place. And it was no small affair! The whole village was invited. So, of course, we have Jesus and his disciples invited as well, to this 7-day party. Can you imagine? After they arrive, about mid-day of the wedding reception, Jesus’ mother quickly found him saying in a panic; “They’ve run out of wine.” What shall we do? No wine! This was a travesty! I mean this was a wedding, not a wake. If anyone found out, it would be a huge embarrassment to the family. They didn’t have any grocery store or 7-11 to run to. They didn’t have a state liquor store down the street. Without skipping a beat, Jesus’ mom gave him the look. You know that look. The one that says, “You’re going to need to do something about this.” (In the series; in each scene like this – it was always some woman giving him the puppy dog eyes, not stern, but pleading.)

Jesus, likely tired from his walk to the party, asked her what she expects him to do. “What does this have to do with me? Shouldn’t we mind our own business?” he asked. He continued; “My time has not come.” But without replying, Mary turned to the servants and told them to “follow his directions, he’ll know what to do.” Just as swiftly as she found Jesus, Mary leaves him, and the disciples to their task, so she can go and comfort and give some assurance to the embarrassed mother of the groom. This was a big deal. It was the first day of the wedding celebration and people expected wine - for 7 days.

Maybe after standing there for a minute and contemplating what the walk home with his mother might be like if he chose to do nothing, Jesus turned and asked the servants if there was any water nearby. And after they said yes, he told the servants to fill up the stone jars that were sitting in the corner, (meant to hold water for purification rituals). Six stone jars, each of which could hold 30 gallons of water. It must have taken a long time to fill. By the time the servants had filled them all, as instructed - to the brim—180 gallons of water total, the guests were getting restless, including both sets of parents, of the new couple who were wondering if their reputation would ever recover from this mortification.

Jesus then told the servants to draw some of the water out of the stone jars, and take it to the chief steward. When the steward tasted the wine, (the way the series depicts this scene) the steward stops everything, calling everyone’s attention to himself, and he makes an announcement – “that this is the most excellent wine he has ever tasted”. He was, shocked -because in those days (or perhaps like every party ever thrown), the host usually served the good wine first and by the time the guests are “full” they bring out the cheap stuff because they will never know the difference. Whew! They dodged a bullet. Everyone is overcome with relief and filled with awe. Now, with this new wine on his tongue, much better than anything they had served so far, the steward gasps aloud saying; “Who, saves the best wine for last?”

For John the writer of this gospel, this was a sign. Throughout his writings he includes 7 of them. In the other gospel writers talk about miracles; and yet in John, we are told Jesus performed signs. Because, according to John, the point of Jesus’s healings or his feeding of the five thousand, the purpose of walking on the water, or raising Lazarus from the dead, isn’t to reverse a something already set in motion, or to inspire awe or wonder in the receiver. No, for John each moment like these in Jesus’ ministry; reveals, who Jesus is, and what he had come to do. So, here, at a wedding reception, when Jesus turned the water into wine, for those who were there it was an epiphany; an “ah-ha!”. John says it revealed his glory. And more importantly, when his disciples saw it, they believed in him.

When Jesus first calls his disciples in John’s gospel, he doesn’t say, “follow me,” he says; “come and see.” Remember that? Come and see who I am and what I am all about. Come and bear witnesses to what I am about to do. As it was with this 1st sign; Jesus turned water into wine, the disciples saw it and believed – probably, because they heard echoes of the prophecies from the Old Testament about a Messiah who was to come. Like in Isaiah 25 where it is written “On this mountain he will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.” Or, from Jeremiah 31:12; “They shall come and sing aloud, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord, over the grain, the wine; and they shall never languish again.” The disciples had been taught over the years, that according to scripture; “when the Messiah came, there would be plenty.” Which may not mean much to you and I, when we have enough, but believe me, it feels miraculous when you run out of wine - or know what it feels like to be hungry.

After all, Jesus makes way too much wine. 180 gallons worth! He makes the equivalent of 1,000 bottles of the very best quality wine. A vintage, mind you, that even makes the head steward sit up straighter and wonder aloud. It is as if Jesus is reminding us that in God’s kingdom there is more than enough to go around. And that no one should receive the dregs. While God’s love and grace had once been measured by laws and standards, now the best had come! God’s love and grace is about to overflow out of those old jars for everyone, so that anyone who wants to drink of God’s goodness - has enough to drink their fill.

This story is about more than; crying over spilt wine – or not enough wine, and trying to fix things to make sure everyone (including mama) is happy. It is a story about Jesus’ “coming out” party so that people know who he is and the abundant grace and joy he will bring. In the previous chapter of John; John 1, it says; “We beheld his glory, the glorious presence of the Son of God, and from his fullness, (you mean, kind of like the fullness of six large vats of wine?) “we all have received grace upon grace upon grace.” We have gone from the old wine and old religion of laws and guilt – now to the new, of grace in his fullness, John says this sign; “turning water into wine” revealed Jesus’ glory.

This miraculous sign from Jesus allows the party to continue. He turns the host’s embarrassment into joy and their worry into wonder. It is as if Jesus is reminding us that in God’s kingdom the plain water of our lives can be transformed into something better when we “come and see.” Something rich and joyful. Something more powerful than our anxiety or our concern. We are no longer isolated in our own corners, but drawn back into the beloved community, into the banquet of God’s reign.

This wedding story is pure grace. There is not one trace of judgment in the story. There are no put-downs such as ‘you drink too much,’ or ‘you party too much.’ It’s about grace.

I’ll concluded with this story about a speaker at a church conference, who reminded the audience that; “all of our sins had been forgiven. Your past sins. Your present sins. Your future sins.” The speaker emphasized that future sins would be forgiven.” It reminds me of the joke: “Lord, I have not sinned yet today. I have not lost my temper today. I have not cursed today. I have not lusted today. Bless me now as I get up. Amen.”

God is so good. God forgives all our past sins, my present sins, and even my sins in the future, even the sins we haven’t committed yet.” Have you ever been to a wedding in the Holy Land? I have – and it’s a blast, a party! A feast! And so is being a disciple of Christ.

This might be the greatest sign of all. For in this one act, right at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus shows us that the best is yet to come. No matter what you might be going through right now, it is as if he is telling us: “Don’t worry. Joy, abundance, and miraculous surprise is coming. This is not how the story ends. Like good wine at a wedding – freshly poured and overflowing. Jesus is saving the best for last.”

Let us pray: Lord, we need a miracle today. Like Jesus changing water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana, we need a miracle today. We are tired, Lord, of the hurts of this world. We are discouraged in the face of injustice, war, poverty, and indifference. We need a miracle today, Lord. Your steadfast love, like a mighty mountain, will not be moved. Your gifts, as many as the mighty winds, cannot be counted. Your glory, like a mighty torch, will not be put out. Lord, show us your glory, that in you we may be moved to see your grace overflowing to us so that we might minister to those who do not know you – yet. We lift up the names of those who are sick and can’t be with us – Lord’s prayer……

Invocation: O God of steadfast love, at the wedding in Cana your Son Jesus turned water into wine, delighting all who were there. May you transform our hearts by your Holy Spirit, this hour, so that we may use our varied gifts to show forth the light of your love as one body in Christ. Thank you for your presence as we worship and praise you. Amen.

Benediction: God of wedding parties and new wine, sends you forth forgiven, grace upon grace 180 gallons of grace - overflowing. The best is yet to come!