

Come to the Party

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
March 30, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship during Lent
Text: John 2:1-10

As a pastor, I have a lot of wedding stories, good and bad. I think all clergy do. Weddings are among the most fraught of all celebrations folks put together in their lifetimes. And they have changed so much over the years! When my parents got married in 1939, it was on a Wednesday afternoon. Following a simple church wedding, their reception was in the yard at my grandparents' house. Well, actually they had two receptions happening because my grandmother was a card carrying member of the local temperance organization so there was supposedly no drinking at their wedding. Except that my dad and his dad and my mom's brothers and all their friends had a keg in the basement to supplement the fruit punch on the lawn. As far as I know, no one was ever the wiser! My mom was appalled every time my dad told the story.

Nowadays weddings run the gambit from spontaneous and simple to full week spectacles costing thousands and thousands of dollars. One big difference now is that weddings have become big business, an industry even. Destination weddings are a thing as are venue weddings. In fact, church weddings are not so much in fashion anymore. And sometimes even those church weddings that do happen are not so much about the couple wanting to be married in a place dedicated to God as it is about church as the backdrop for the wedding photos. The church I served in for 20 years was such a church since it was historical, picturesque and it could seat 350 people.

As I said, all clergy have a lot of funny wedding stories and that's a good thing because they are wonderful tension breakers at the rehearsals. I always begin wedding rehearsals with a little speech about how folks put so much effort into ensuring their weddings are perfect in every detail that they often don't enjoy their own weddings as much as they should. This I learned from personal experience! So, I

tell them a bunch of stories about wedding screw-ups in weddings I have officiated. Like the time the 2 year old ring bearer made it half way down the aisle and then freaked out taking the ring with him as he ran out of the building with his mother – the matron of honor – running after him in high heels. Then there was the time the best man dropped the keys of the groom’s car down the windshield defroster vent and, since it was a rental, it had to be left at the church while everyone scrambled for rides from the church to the reception. And I can never forget the time when both the bride’s and groom’s parents were divorced so there were literally four sets of parents, each coming into the rehearsal expecting to be THE parents representing their children. That was ugly because none of them got along. Wow! I finally had to just separate them in different pews. Yikes! Not a good vibe at that one at all. I was very grateful to only be covering the rehearsal for a colleague and not doing the wedding. I often wonder what happened to that couple!

Well, I literally could go on and on, but I think you get my point. Weddings are occasions we approach with high expectations, knowing it’s a great time to connect with family and friends. I think that’s why this story we read this morning from the Gospel of John is one we can all relate to so easily. We’ve all been to weddings, enjoying that special time with family and friends. So, it’s comforting, fun even, to imagine Jesus going to a wedding and just hanging out. We wonder, was he shy? Did he hang back or join in the fun? Did Jesus dance? How well did he know the bride and groom? Did the disciples just tag along because Jesus brought them or did they know the bride and groom too? It’s surmised by biblical scholars that Jesus and his mother were probably relatives of the couple, but while we know the disciples were invited, we don’t know if the disciples had any relationship with the couple. It’s the sort of thing I wonder about because, when Jesus recruits his disciples in the text just preceding this, it’s clear he didn’t know them well, if at all. So, it’s kind of confusing to think they could all get invited to the same wedding but not know each other prior to

the wedding. That question intrigues me because other than saying Jesus and the disciples attended the wedding, we don't hear anything about the disciples as the story runs its course. In other words, it's clear this story is about Jesus beginning his ministry at a joyous party to which he and his mom had been invited.

I confess whenever I read this story, I try to imagine what Jesus was like at a party because that's what a wedding is – a party! No less in Jesus' time than today. Food and drink are planned for and prepared. The best of everything is put out for the wedding guests to enjoy as they celebrate the creation of this new family as the bride and groom are wed. It was, in fact, common practice for the families of the couple to over extend themselves financially so they could put on the best possible celebration to honor the young couple. Another point of commonality with weddings today – spending more than is prudent to make the day one that stands out! And everyone was having a very good time at this wedding. So much so that the wine ran out while guests were still enjoying themselves.

Enter Jesus' mother. Note that John does not call her Mary. She is not named in John's text, but she is clearly identified as his mother. She goes to Jesus and tells him they have run out of wine to which he responds, "what concern is that to you and me?" She doesn't respond to him. But she does go to the servants and tells them to do whatever Jesus asks them to do. Shortly thereafter he comes over to them and asks them to go and refill with water the huge stone jars which were there so the guests could wash as they arrived. It's important to realize these would have been huge so refilling them would be no easy thing in the days before running water and garden hoses. But refill them they did although we are not told how nor how long it took. But, once they were refilled, Jesus told them to draw some water out with a cup and take it to the chief steward to taste. I don't know what the chief steward had been doing since he has no clue about the wine situation. However, after tasting the wine made from water, he quickly found the bridegroom to tell him that this new batch of wine was excellent.

He also asked why he waited until now, when the guests were already drunk, to serve the good stuff! That's where the story in the text ends. We don't know how long after this Jesus stayed. We don't know if his mom thanked him. We don't know if she ever told anyone about what Jesus had done. It just ends and we are left with smiles and questions. Not bad for a first miracle!

According to John, this was the first miracle Jesus performed – creating exceptional wine out of water in large stone jars usually used for washing up. This story is also the first, and I think probably the only time, Jesus' mother is the instigator of a miracle at his hands. I have a theory about that. I think Mary knew, as she had from that first night she laid him in that manger, that what the angel had told her about this baby was the truth. She knew he was special, called by God to something beyond imagining, something that would change the world. And, since she was his mother, she also knew her son. She knew that he was perplexed by just what it was God was asking of him. She knew he had been baptized by John and that his disciples had begun joining with him shortly after but ... now what? So, when she sees this snafu with the wine happen at this wedding, she sees a way forward for him – this son she loved so much. She went over to him and told him about the wine situation. He was clearly irritated with her for this little nudge. We can imagine the sharpness in his tone as he snapped at her. But this woman knew her son which is why she went over to the servants and told them to do whatever he said. She knew he would do something because he could do something. She knew it was his time, even when he did not. And he listened to her. His first miracle was then behind him. His only way forward now was forward. And he left with the disciples following him into a ministry that changed the world.

I chose this story for us to reflect on for today because it is so rich in details and meaning. I love that John's Gospel grounds Jesus' first miracle at a party, of all things. I love this because it seems the perfect way for Jesus to ease his way into this new life he was beginning. It's

worth noting here that in John's text, Jesus does not spend 40 days in the wilderness meditating on next steps and fighting off devilish temptations. No, nothing so heavy or morose for John. Instead, he has Jesus and his new buddies get their start at a wedding – itself a powerful symbol of new beginnings. And, what is this first miracle anyway? He's not healing someone of a horrible disease. He's not raising someone from the dead. He's not chasing tormenting demons into a herd of pigs that then run off a cliff. No! Nothing so dramatic. He's helping out at a wedding of some family members who have unexpectedly run out of wine. So, to keep the party going and the celebrations continuing on, Jesus gives them more wine. He gives them more wine, and therefore, more time to party. I think that is just amazing. This is Jesus doing something precious for his family and close friends. This is Jesus recognizing that these moments of celebration and joy are all too rare in life and he was going to do whatever he could to help this particular moment of joy go on as long as possible. Another way to look at this is that Jesus knew the healing power of joy and by this, his first miracle, he allowed a special, sacred moment of joy to continue to unfold. That, dear ones, is an entirely different spin on what healing is and what it can look like.

This story holds a message for us that is especially relevant for these crazy days in which we find ourselves. You know what's going on. I don't need to remind you of all there is to worry about, to be afraid of and horrified by. You know that already. So here's what I want you to hold on to in the midst of all this craziness. Jesus' first miracle was to do something to make a party last longer, for joy to continue unabated. Jesus' first miracle was set in the midst of one of the most basic celebrations of love and joy there is – a wedding – a new beginning for a new family. Jesus knew the healing power of joyful moments, however long they last, and in these fraught days through which we are living, Jesus wants us to always be looking for joy, for those moments when we can help joy along so that its transforming energy can bring light and hope into a difficult moment.

Dear friends, one of the most important lessons of this story for us as we consider it in the midst of these days through which we are living is that joy matters! Celebrating those joyful moments in life where love and life take center stage – that’s where our energy needs to be. Worrying about all these things going on that we can’t control gets us nowhere. Dear ones, let’s find ways to encourage each other to lay down our worries so we can re-discover happiness and joy, even if its only for a little while. Don’t forget that when Jesus gave them more wine and more time for joy, he knew he had much to do, and he had no idea how things would work out for him. But he still laid the foundation for joy in that moment. I can think of nothing more important for us to do in these unnerving days through which we are living. Look for those moments of joy – when they come to you by surprise or when you can give them to someone else. Dear ones, they matter, now more than ever. Dare to look for them and to savor them when they come. And, I’m betting the more you look for them, the more they will come to you, replenishing your soul with hope and strength for whatever lies ahead. What more can we ask of Jesus in this moment? Worth considering, isn’t it. Amen.