

The First Miracle

Text: John 2: 1-12

Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell

July 21, 2013

Well, it must have been an amazing party! Just to think, when you do the math, after Jesus fiddled with the water, there was something like 180 gallons of wine around and about! And that was after the earlier supply had run out! Yikes!

Of course, in first century Palestine, wedding celebrations were events that took as long as a week. They were not just an afternoon or an evening, and involved the whole community, not just a small family circle. So it was wine for a week! but still!

And there were some pretty interesting people on the guest list, too: family and friends of all sorts and sizes. Not to name drop or anything, but Mary, the mother of Jesus, was there. Jesus was there, too, though apparently he arrived on the late side with his disciples.

Such is the stage set by our scripture passage this morning from the Gospel of John ó a time-honored story called the *Wedding at Cana in Galilee*. I simply want us to turn our thoughts around it together. As you might imagine, with our daughter Karen taking her walk down the aisle three weeks from yesterday, weddings are about all that Pam and I seem to think about these present days! So let's explore the story and see what insights might rise and ripple among us.

Here's a first insight, particularly if you like metaphors, as I do. It's something about that miraculous production of wine ó the first recorded sign or miracle of Jesus's extraordinary power. Deeper yet, though, and more important entirely, it's about the mingling together, the juxtaposing of two very large and spacious thoughts ó that of marriage and also of miracles.

This curious fact is absolutely unmistakable. Asked for a sign of his power, Jesus chose a wedding in which to act. It is as if to suggest that miracles and marriage somehow belong together. And I am quite convinced that more than one miracle was happening in Cana that day. I think Jesus actually placed two miracles side by side, and with intent. The more material one was the water turned to wine, which could be tested by taste. The other one, far more complex and spiritual, was that two were becoming one, which could only be tested by life.

Michael Downey once wrote of this truth: "There is something quite staggering about marriage. Two very fragile and wounded people, ever so limited and vulnerable ó even and especially in their strength and radiance at that moment, promise to lay down their lives for one another, to make their lives one, to be with and for one another in and through life and even death. It's this radical self-giving, so audaciously and boldly proclaimed in word and deed, that makes marriage the most conspicuous miracle of God's abiding presence." And Frederick Buechner adds:¹ "A marriage made in heaven

is one where two souls become more richly themselves together than the chances are that either one of them could have managed to become alone.ö

Isn't that what we hope for when two people find each other and fall in love and declare a future, for better or worse? I suspect, too, it is that high hope that feels so tattered when a marriage doesn't work out.

Here's a second interesting dimension to the story. The marriage at Cana in Galilee provides no image or description of the couple. Not a hint. Not even a single word. Absolutely nothing!

I kind of like that. Actually, I'm grateful for that. Because we can assume things so quickly when we see a couple. Isn't that true? In fact, by their appearance, we can actually think that we know more than we do. It's odd the way that our minds can do that so naturally. And it can quickly lead us astray.

I tell you this pastoral secret. I've married many hundreds of couples over the years. They have been assorted: wonderful, interesting, google-eyed and aglow. And frankly, this too: unlikely, peculiar, odd, awkward and öoh my goodness!ö But as I come to know them, I always discover they each come holding together and alone the mystery and spell and vulnerability and magnificence and power of love. And they each come trying to express that in their own unique way.

Among the comments that I will make as I officiate for Karen and Meredith is that we will be, at that time, in Provincetown. We will have gathered mostly as family, but with a few close friends, too. I'll make sure to remind them and all of us that it was on that tiny arc of sand that the Pilgrims first landed ó seekers of new ways of freedom and religious expression; adventurers of not only geography but of new models of community. I'll remind them that they, as a gay couple, are helping all of us to still find new ways of expressing love and life together. In the small circle of our family, Karen and Meredith have been door openers in just such a way.

I wonder: can you see what a fabulous invitation the wedding at Cana gives us? By not identifying the couple too closely, we are left with a spirit of openness about what partners and love and fidelity and promise really entail.

Here's a last insight. And this one is more my own wondering as I think far beyond the tiny town of Cana.

We live in an age where words like *marriage* and *equality* are hot-button triggers. More: in the real-time of this week, we have seen again how quickly our culture can become polarized and threatened over isms of all sorts ó and how deep and profound the pain is.

Among the worries that Pam and I both share is that Karen and Meredith live in a world where discrimination is yet alive and well. We have seen it and experienced it within our wider family and even among our circle of friends. That's why dialogue and

understanding are so urgently needed. And it's why the testimony of the United Church of Christ is so important to me.²

Karen and Meredith met ten years ago at the University of New Hampshire - right around the time that Gene Robinson was named Episcopal Bishop in the Granite State. His consecration was held in the largest public venue in New Hampshire - which is the hockey rink at UNH.

As the day approached, busloads of people arrived on campus. Many of them were hate groups. Karen was incensed. She called home to tell us and she could barely get her breath. She said, "Dad, you wouldn't believe the hateful things people are shouting. They are saying awful stuff in the name of God." I listened as she told her story. "But Dad, there was this group that had the coolest signs. They said things like 'God doesn't hate people.' 'Jesus didn't exclude people. We don't either.' 'God loves diversity.' I asked, 'Karen, who were those people?' She said, 'Some group called the UCC!' I declared, 'That's *your* church. That's the United Church of Christ.' She said, 'But, I thought we were Congregational!'

I was nearly in tears. To make the conversation even more poignant, Karen had not as yet fully revealed her story to us. But here was a young woman coming of age who found something on the religious landscape that made such sense to her - a God whose love is large enough to hold all of humankind - even beyond the bias of our boundaries.

I ask your best thoughts and prayers on August 10 at 5:00 in the evening!

We won't be in Cana at Galilee, but we will surround Karen and Meredith with celebration. There will be wine and family, oysters and shrimp, promises of love and fidelity, trust and passion, laughter and joy.

And all because Someone once upon a time, in the off-the-beaten-path small Galilean town of Cana, reminded us that sweet weddings and intoxicating miracles are not so very far apart! Amen!

© 2013 Charles Geordie Campbell.

¹ Frederick Buechner. *Beyond Words*. Harper and Row, 2004, pp. 242-243.

² Ron Buford, et al. *Getting Ready for Marriage: Today's Guide for Couples*. The Stillspeaking Writers Group, 2013, p. 3.

First Church of Christ Congregational
United Church of Christ
12 South Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107
860.233.9605 www.whfirstchurch.org