

January 20, 2019 – Isaiah 62:1-5 & John 2:1-11

My wife and I wanted a simple wedding. Oh, we had our little flourishes here and there. The chapel at Concordia Seminary, where we were married, was enormous and beautiful. We had a decent sized guest list and full wedding parties.

But when it came to the service, we were really looking for short and sweet. There were no extra songs or speeches. The pastor we had chosen was a lot like me in his preaching. Brief, simple, and to the point. We had all of the standard service elements, the vows, the rings, all that. But nothing more, really. Beginning to end, I think our wedding was 15, 20 minutes tops.

Because as beautiful and meaningful and important as the wedding ceremony is for the couple, the part that the guests really enjoy isn't at the church. It's afterwards, at the reception. It's the food and the dancing and the catching up with old friends. And maybe most importantly of all: it's the booze.

The champagne and the open bar. And the freedom to get a little tipsy and strike up a conversation with complete strangers, who are likewise intoxicated. My mom actually suggested that we not have an open bar. That we not have alcohol at all. She had been to too many wedding receptions where people had gotten drunk and ruined it for everyone.

But we wouldn't hear of it. We trusted our friends. We trusted our families. And we wanted alcohol at our reception. It's part of the wedding experience.

And the funny thing is, it's always been a part of the wedding experience. Throughout history, weddings have been an excuse to throw a party. And our own Bible is proof of that. Reference after reference in Scripture to the joy and excitement and fun of a wedding celebration.

Our Old Testament Lesson even makes mention of it. Isaiah tells us that weddings are times of delight and rejoicing for the bride and groom. They were once desolate, but now they are married. They were once alone, but now they are together.

We see this all over God's Word. But maybe never so clearly as in our Gospel Lesson. The wedding at Cana. Cana was a town a few miles north of Nazareth. That's probably why Jesus and his mother were invited. These were just a couple of family friends from the neighboring town.

And so Jesus goes to Cana with his mother and disciples. Why wouldn't they? Jewish weddings of that era were huge. You think your wedding reception was big? No, no, no... You're reception was nothing in comparison to this.

They knew how to throw a party. A massive party that lasted for days on end. For a wealthy family with money to spend, you could end up with a full week of food and wine and music and partying like you've never seen.

Except that the wine is gone. We're not told why. Many scholars have tried to make a big deal about this, going on at length about the humiliation and ridicule that a family could receive for running out of wine early at a wedding. Perhaps.

But perhaps the party is simply over. We're never told how long Jesus is there before the wine runs out. Perhaps it's just time for "last call." Whatever the case, Mary finds out about this and decides to tell her son as well.

In steps Jesus with the very first miracle of his ministry. He calls the servants together and directs them to fill six large containers with water. And, as we're told, these weren't your average 2 quart lemonade pitchers. These were huge jars holding 20-30 gallons each.

Not knowing what has happened, the master of ceremonies draws out a cupful and it has been turned into wine. And not just any wine. A vast quantity of the very finest wine. The type of fine wine you would serve to make the opening toast for the reception.

Great! Impressive! Party on! Woo hoo! But... why? Jesus is beginning a ministry that will be about healing the sick and casting out demons and proclaiming the salvation of God through his own painful death and glorious resurrection.

And he chooses for his first miracle to... help a bunch of partiers stay drunk. I'm serious! That's what this amounts to. I'm sure the bride and groom were grateful. I'm sure the guests were grateful. But honestly, out of all the ways for God to reveal himself to humanity, making 150 gallons of wine?

It's perplexing. And there's any number of different lessons you might draw from this. God likes joy in the life of believers. Alcohol is OK (and don't let the Baptists tell you otherwise). Ask Jesus for anything, he answers all our prayers. Eh... perhaps.

But I don't think that's the point here. I think this miracle is about throwing a party. But I'm not sure it's about this party. In other words, Jesus did a miracle for this particular family, but I'm not sure he was thinking about this particular family when he did the miracle.

I think he may have been thinking about that verse from Isaiah: "*...for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.*"

Jesus was thinking about a different family. He was thinking about his own family. Not his mother or brothers. He was thinking about us.

He was thinking about the Church's marriage to her Lord. About the day that's coming when there will be a party and the wine will flow. When every day will be like the first day of the celebration, and there will be so much wine that you know without a doubt that it will never end.

Jesus was just beginning his ministry, but in that first miracle he showed his mother and disciples and everyone gathered there and all of us as well exactly where it would all end up. It was a glimpse into the future. A glimpse into Jesus' future.

When his hour really had fully come. When he would descend on the clouds of glory and gather all his faithful to the wedding feast of the Lamb. Seated on his throne forever. Displaying to every nation on the earth, Jewish and Gentile, the glory of his righteous.

And it's a glimpse that we desperately need. Because it's easy to become cynical about this world in which we live. Angry with its sinfulness. And frustrated with its brokenness.

And it's bad enough when it's someone else who's making us cynical and angry and frustrated with their sin. But then we look at ourselves. And we realize we're just as broken. And we should be just as cynical and angry and frustrated with our own thoughts, words, and deeds.

God brought us into the paradise of Eden, with all its splendor. God gives us every good thing that we could ever ask for. God is faithful and just, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And yet, we reject him and rebel against him. We are the party poopers, who take all this good that God gives us and make a complete mess of it.

And, in his great love, Christ comes to us in this miracle. He reveals himself to us in this first miracle. With the greatest gift that he could give us at this moment.

Because if his hour has not yet come and he can't give us just yet the gift of a new heaven and a new earth and a world purified of sin and corruption and a wedding reception to end all wedding receptions. If fixing this earth with all its problems is not quite yet an option. Then the very best thing he can give us is hope.

Hope in a future that is better than the past or the present. Hope in a party that will never end. Hope in a joy that can only come by marriage.

By being given a new name. We are no longer named "Forsaken". We are no longer named "Desolate". We no longer live in loneliness and despair.

For despite our sins, we are forgiven and accepted. We, the Church, are the bride of Christ. And like any bride, we take the name of the one we marry. So we are not the Forsaken Church. We are not the Desolate Church. We are the Church of Jesus Christ. We are truly Immanuel's Church. And like the light of dawn, the salvation of "God with us" has shone on each one of us.

Jesus chose a wedding to reveal the joy of the resurrection. He chose a wedding because it was the best reflection this world has to offer of paradise itself. Think about your own wedding. Think about the best wedding you've ever been to. Think about a reception filled with family and friends and food and music and wine. Lots and lots of wine. That's the paradise that God has waiting for us. That is the eternity that Christ goes to prepare for us.

We are not Forsaken. We are not Desolate. Washed clean in the waters of baptism and the blood of Christ, we are the crown of beauty in the hand of our Lord. A royal diadem in the hand of our God. And He rejoices over us. Amen.