

The Holy Gospel according to John, the second chapter.

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. <sup>2</sup>Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. <sup>3</sup>When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." <sup>4</sup>And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." <sup>5</sup>His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." <sup>6</sup>Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. <sup>7</sup>Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. <sup>8</sup>He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. <sup>9</sup>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 <sup>10</sup>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." <sup>11</sup>Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Tena koutou katoa. Good morning from Aotearoa New Zealand. It's wonderful to be with you in worship again. Of course, I realize that the reason we're together on Zoom today is because you're not able to worship together at the church. We've been following the news of omicron in the US and are very sorry to hear about the new and lingering challenges it has been bringing. I hope you all are safe and well, and I hope you will be able to return to the church building soon.

As many of you know, we have been living here in New Zealand since the end of 2019, just a few months before the pandemic started. Kristen is working as a doctor in a clinic here. When we started planning for this adventure, we initially thought of it as a family gap year—a one-year break. But then we quickly decided to make it two years. Now we've finally got a date set for our return to Minneapolis of June this year, which will be about 2 1/2 years since we left.

One of things we've learned a lot about during our time here is the language. Now, in New Zealand there are two official languages. One is English. Of course, we're all pretty confident in our English speaking abilities, though there still have been heaps of new words to learn. For example, a bell pepper in a New Zealand grocery store is called a *capsicum*. These shoes which I wear just about everyday and used to know as flip flops are called *jandals*. And when we go to the beach, which is right over there, we wear not swimsuits but *togs*. I expect we'll be using those words, *jandals* and *togs*, for years even after we're back in the US.

The other language in Aotearoa New Zealand, which was entirely new to us, is Te Reo Maori, the language of the Maori people who have lived on these islands since the 14th Century, when the first settlers traveled by canoe from East Polynesia. We hear many Maori words sprinkled in everyday conversation here, and the language is an important part of the culture, especially here in the Northland where we live. I've determined that I am without question the fourth best Maori speaker in our family. Kristen has learned much through her work at the clinic. And the kids have learned even more at their school, as Te Reo is a crucial part of the New Zealand school curriculum, especially at the Primary School level.

We've also learned much about Maori cultural practices, or *tikanga*. One practice that I have witnessed many times is that after giving a speech, it is customary—in fact, strongly encouraged—that one sings a song, or a *waiata* as it's called. So for example, at a funeral, after the burial, there is a time when people can share stories and memories, as we might do at a church or funeral home in Minnesota. But after each reflection is shared, the speaker then

sings a *waiata*. It is almost always a familiar one, and people sing along. It's a community event, a way of responding to a speech.

So after my sermon today, I'd like to share a *waiata* that we have learned. The kids learned this one at school, and we often sing it as a family. Now since we're going to sing it together as the hymn of the day, I'll briefly teach it to you now. Like many *waiata*, it has a Christian theme. And the words are very simple. It's just Love, Faith, Peace for us all. In Maori, the words are *te aroha* (love), *te whakapono* (faith or trust), *me te rangimarie* (peace).

One last thing before I return to the Gospel reading: I want to say that we are grateful for your prayers. We tune in for worship when we can on Monday mornings, and it means a lot to us that you think of us and keep us in prayer while we're away and that we remain connected in that way. Know that you are in our prayers as well.

Now, back to Gospel reading for today, the story of the wedding at Cana. Many of you may already know, I would guess, that the turning of water into wine at Cana is known as the first miracle that Jesus performed, or the first sign, as John calls it. And this story has traditionally been part of the church's Epiphany observance. Along with the visit of the magi and the baptism of Jesus, this passage about the wedding of Cana tells us something of who Jesus is, how God's grace, God's very presence is revealed through him...how God is made manifest in him. We have heard of the star that brought wise men from the East to come and pay him homage. We have heard of the dove at his baptism and the voice from heaven saying "This is my beloved." Now we get another sign of God's presence, an epiphany of who Jesus is. And it happens at a rather surprising place...at a wedding.

Well, it happens to be wedding season here in New Zealand, fittingly, these warm summer weeks between Christmas and the start of the new school year. And that's especially true this year with one very big anticipated wedding coming up. New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern will marry her partner Clarke Gayford very soon. It's big news, of course. I've been rather surprised to know, following this story, that even a head of state such as Jacinda has had to deal with wedding preparation stress. Not only did her wedding have to be delayed for a couple of years because of the pandemic, but the first venue was cancelled over a catering dispute (the owner of that venue is now sending a \$5000 bill to the couple). Plus, now the guest list will need to be trimmed due to COVID restrictions. Border closures will mean international celebrity friends won't be able to attend. Prince William and Kate, Emmanuel Macron, and Stephen Colbert, for example, will have to miss out. Jacinda claims that she's happy with a smaller, more intimate gathering to celebrate her wedding and that her partner Clarke is taking care of all the details while she's busy, you know, running the country. But still, I imagine she's felt at least some worry about the process. Wedding planning almost always brings with it some stress.

Still, of course, it's worth it. Bringing people together to bless a couple starting their life together in marriage and to celebrate with them is worth the effort. That's why we keep celebrating weddings. The joy that is experienced there is the point. It far outweighs the stress. The joy, above all, is what is remembered.

In the same way, I think joy is the point of the miracle at the wedding of Cana as well. Yes, there was some stress at that wedding, too. They had run out of wine. Mary got Jesus involved and apparently had to twist his arm a bit in doing so. There was a crisis. A family was at risk of humiliation. But Jesus finally took action, and, in the end, there was wine for the party, more than enough. And it was more than good enough, it was even better wine than they had started with and were expecting. It wasn't just that Jesus solved the problem to alleviate the stress for the wedding party. This miracle went above and beyond. It was abundant, even lavish.

It's a fascinating passage. Again, the first big event of Jesus' public ministry in John. But as far as miracles go, it seems to me that it is not a very practical one. I mean, wine is nice,

and I'm sure the hosts were quite relieved, but I would guess that if you had taken a poll of the wedding guests that day, they would have chosen something different than just more wine. You could live with a lack of wine. But poverty, oppression, threats of violence...these were surely more pressing concerns. And in fact, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus addresses this kind of concern right away. As his first public act in *that* Gospel, he reads from the scroll of Isaiah and says,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

But in John the miracle of Cana is about nothing more (or nothing less) than joy. He didn't yet address the pressing concerns of poverty or Roman occupation. Not yet. Rather, this miracle, I believe, signified to the community gathered there first of all that God still took delight in them, even though times were hard. No matter what the circumstances of their daily lives were, God was still with them and wished for them love, peace, and even joy.

I suppose most of us have felt a real lack of joy lately. Another year, another Christmas with COVID. Now back to online church and online school. Struggles to get covid tests and every day new information and new questions about living with this virus. Most of us have not been feeling especially joyful.

This year, back before Christmas, our family made an Advent wreath using leftover candles from the church we've been a part of here in New Zealand. They started out something like this, though a bit shorter. And after burning them each night throughout the 12 days of Christmas up until Epiphany, it got to be a little messy. I thought this was appropriate this year because Christmas has been a little messy. People have had to make decisions about whether or not they will gather with friends and family. Here in New Zealand there has been a lot of controversy over vaccine mandates, and some teachers and other workers have lost their jobs because they chose not to be vaccinated. Restaurants, shops, even churches are required to check vaccine passports at the door if they wish to continue to be open. On Christmas morning, a family turned up for worship at our church here even though they hadn't been vaccinated, which put our vicar in a difficult position. To say the least, Christmas was messy...a bit like this Advent wreath.

But Christ is born into messy situations. God's grace is still revealed despite the difficult circumstances we face—abundant grace for all people. God takes delight in us still. God takes delight in you and longs for you to know love, peace, and joy.

This week I was reminded of something that Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in her memoir, *Leaving Church*. She asks the question, "What is saving your life right now?" She writes:

Salvation is so much more than many of its proponents would have us believe...  
Salvation is a word for the divine spaciousness that comes to human beings in  
all the tight places where their lives are at risk...Sometimes it comes as an  
extended human hand and sometimes as a bolt from the blue, but either way it  
opens a door in what looked for all the world like a wall.

We know what is draining us of life—covid, stress, poverty, homelessness, racial injustices, the list goes on. Things that continue to need our time and energy on a daily basis. But what is giving you life, even saving your life, in the midst of all of this? Or, we might ask, even in these difficult times, what is giving you joy? Or, if not joy, at least a glimpse of joy?

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote that what was saving her life was her work teaching school, living in relationship with creation, observing the sabbath each week, and encountering God in other people. These things she saw as God's saving grace in her life.

What is it for you? Where do you see God's saving grace? I hope that there will be many such glimpses for you this week and that they are epiphanies of God's abundant, lavish love. Amen.