

“Cana-joy”

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church by
The Rev. Catherine Somerville on Sunday January 17, 2016

Text: John 2: 1-11 (the wedding at Cana)

Weddings are accidents waiting to happen. Something almost always goes wrong. The worst wedding I ever presided at took place at a camp up on Windy Lake. I hope none of you were related to these two, because this story is horrible. The bride showed up in a bathing suit. It was white, a two piece bikini. The groom was wearing a nice black suit. When he saw her appear, ready to walk down to the dock where they were to be married, he burst out laughing and he kept laughing through the entire wedding. The best man was in such a state of shock that when it came time for me to ask him for the rings, he threw them towards me, and they flew over my head, and landed in the lake. We had to have a very long pause while a couple of the guests went for a swim to find them. The rings were found, to great applause from the hundred or so guests. I couldn’t get that license signed and get out of there fast enough. I hope they lived happily ever after.

Something is going wrong at this wedding in Cana in Galilee. In those days, the bride and groom celebrated the marriage, not with a honeymoon but with a seven day wedding feast at the groom’s home. This particular celebration is in trouble, because the wine is giving out before the party is over. The situation constitutes a crisis for the family who shoulder the responsibility of hospitality.

Of all the guests to notice what is wrong, it’s the mother of Jesus. Jesus is off somewhere hovering in the background, and seems content to remain there. His mother tells him to do something. He responds, by telling her that he doesn’t go in for parlour tricks. When his mother tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says, Jesus realizes he might as well start his ministry. He performs one of his most understated mighty acts.

“Fill the jars with water... Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” The best wine is now served to keep the party going. The servants are the ones who know what has happened. The steward is amazed, and we are told that the disciples believed in Jesus.

How is that for a happy ending? The joyous feast has been saved.

Sometimes us church folk forget that Jesus once attended a wedding feast and said yes to gladness and joy. Prompted by his mother, Jesus turned water into wine, to point the guests and us too, the one who hear the story now, towards God, who loves to hear the laughter of people celebrating people. Sometimes the church has forgotten to live the joy of such revelation.

James McBride Dabbs, an author and church leader, remembers religion as the opposite of life in rural South Carolina. "Religion was a day and a place. Religion was Sunday and the church. Almost everything else was life. Religion was a curious, quiet, and inconsequential moment in the vital existence of a country boy. It came around every week, but it didn't have much to do with the rest of my life."

I couldn't help but remember my own dad when I read those words. He was a boy in the 1920's, and he told stories of endless Sunday afternoons, sitting on the front steps in his itchy good suit, and not being able to do anything, because they were Presbyterian after all, and on the Sabbath, good Presbyterian boys went to church. They did not play with their friends, and they certainly didn't have fun.

But the Cana story tells us that Jesus served a God who put joy into life, who thinks it is worth a miracle to keep the party going as we celebrate the relationships that fill our lives to overflowing.

God doesn't want our religion to be so holy, that there is no room left for happiness. Throughout his life and ministry, Jesus of Nazareth celebrated people, people getting married, people being healed of disease and deformity, people enjoying meals together. He carried a spirit of celebration with him wherever he went as he proclaimed a God of mercy and peace and joy. This feast at Cana is still a sign to the church that we are called to rejoice as the people of God, and to toast the world with the amazing good news of grace that we have received.

Church is a place for laughter. Personally, I rather like it when the unexpected pops into worship, and things go a bit sideways. Mistakes happen, and people laugh, for we are all human. One of the very best stories I ever heard of a time when church went really wrong, was told by a former moderator, the elected head of the church, Marion Parady. She was attending the anniversary of a big

church in Newfoundland, and the congregation were trying to do their very best. Lovie and Frank were long time members, and they were asked to take up the offering. Lovie sang in the choir, so she came down from the choir loft, wearing her long, flowing choir gown, and took up the collection. During the doxology, she and Frank brought the offering plates forward. They had to climb a couple of steps and put the offering plates down on the floor in front of the communion table. When she bent down, Lovie put her foot on her choir gown. She couldn't stand up. She froze in embarrassment.

In a voice that was not as quiet as it could have been, Frank said, "O for God's Lovie, would you stop mooning the moderator and lift your foot."

David Steele, another writer and Christian story teller, refers to this spirit of celebration as "Cana-joy". It's the knack of throwing parties where food and music, decorations and laughter combine to create an atmosphere of welcome, well-being, and love. Just like Jesus, Steele learned this grace from his mother, and he thanked God for the gift of celebration that infused his entire ministry. He even coined a beatitude:

"Blessed is the pastor whose church has a real tenor in the choir and a plumber in the congregation. But doubly blessed is the pastor whose congregation knows Cana-joy."

Christians ought to be celebrating constantly, says David Steele. We ought to be preoccupied with parties, banquets, feasts and merriment. We ought to give ourselves over to life-changing joy, for we have found new life in Jesus. We ought to come to church, quite literally, for the fun there is in being a Christian.

The church needs to remember how the mother of Jesus swung into action to keep the party going, and how Jesus turned ordinary water into the finest wine. What a way for Jesus to begin his public ministry. It's about the miracle of God, the God who wants even now for the community of faith to be a celebration of people. Brothers and sisters in Christ, eating cake after church and having conversations that feed the soul. Laughing till the sun goes down. Turning the gym into the biggest banquet hall in the world, and eating and enjoying each other until our bellies and our hearts are full. It is called Cana joy, and if God delights in the world, then God invites us to share that joy, and be the life of the party.

May love, tangible and expressive, transform you.

Joy, holy and earthy, uplift you.

And peace, of heart, home and community be within you always. Amen.

Resources used:

The Word Among Us, Year C, Volume 1, Herbert O'Driscoll, pages 72-79

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor,
pages 260-265