

## **“Caught By Surprise”**

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: John 2: 1-11 and Matthew 13:31-32

I have to tell you that I'm disappointed that we didn't get to have the Ash Wednesday service the other night. I was excited for it, not because ashes in and of themselves are so amazing, but because I love this theme for Lent and I was really excited to share with you that this Lenten series is all about the good news. And it began on Wednesday night not with sadness and sorrow (okay, maybe a little), but with an invitation. We were invited to enter lent not “invited people to focus internally on fasting and self-deprivation during Lent, [we would have been] invited to a communal feast.” The scripture was from Luke's gospel, and it was about people being invited to a great feast, but many found reason that they just couldn't come. The host then invited anyone and everyone who would come...especially those on the margins. “The net is cast wide, though too many guests deny the invitation, instead focusing on their individual concerns. Yet the host's invitation is persistent. They search high and low for the dispossessed and the vulnerable, perhaps those who are hungry to accept the invitation. As guests are gathered in, the miracle is that there is still room. There is more love and abundance available, if only we are present to accept it.” Now that, my friends, would have been an Ash Wednesday that was not at all “normal.” This week, we continue with God's overflowing abundance—quite literally—with the story of the wedding at Cana when the wine is about to run out. I hope that every service we hold

between now and Easter Sunday, you are caught by surprise. If you are, then I'm doing my job. If you're not...ahh...let's ignore that possibility!

Most of you here and online have heard something about the wedding feast at Cana. If nothing else, it often is part of a wedding service. You've heard the story but let me set the stage a little bit. Here is Jesus at a wedding. Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dail describes it with a modern twist in this way:

People didn't think Jesus could boogie like that. It took them by surprise—his dance moves, undoubtedly, but also how much Jesus, Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God...love a good ol' fashioned Electric Slide.

Jesus is there, at the wedding in Cana. And the party is at a tipping point: the moment when people are either gonna dip, or the party is about to go to the next level. The shoes will come off on the dance floor, mama is gonna bust those moves she hasn't since college—but instead something terrible has happened.

The host has run out of wine. The servants know it. And for some reason...Mary knows it, too.

In John's Gospel *this* is how we meet Mary. A woman who knows the panicked secret about to ruin the party: there is no more wine. A woman who knows exactly who can fix it, so she goes to find her son.

Yes, wine is important to the story, but don't get focused on the fact it is wine. We all know there are issues when alcohol is involved. For some, we just don't think it's right to drink. For others, we have learned the hard way that too much alcohol can be quite disruptive to ourselves, our families, and our other relationships. Yes, we're talking about having a party, and yes, we're talking about wine, but rather than focusing on the wine itself, I invite you to consider this story being more about abundance, provision, and the extravagant love of God than a moral thumbs up or thumbs down to wine.

At the same time, for those of you who do drink wine, you know that wine has layers and tastes that you can only savor if you pay attention. Wine is not intended to be gulped down in great quantities. Good wines are about flavor and attention to detail. They are about craft and subtlety. The truth is that study of the Bible should resemble our appreciation of a fine wine. It “means paying attention to the subtleties and the layers as we read it. It means carrying with us new categories and questions to facilitate a fresh experience of the story (Lindsey Scott, Commentary on John 2: 1-11).” Lindsey Scott, in her commentary on the John passage offers what she calls three “tasting notes” about this story:

- 1) What cultural expectations surrounding hospitality sit in the background of this story, and what might that tell us about Jesus’ mission?
- 2) What other texts might the audience think of when encountering this story, and how might that enhance our understanding of the story’s meaning?
- 3) What power dynamics, social structures, and expectations are subverted by the story, and how might that challenge us to consider our own ways of being in the world?

I won’t answer all of those questions today, but you are invited to consider them as you are willing and able. But the wine itself has one more point before we move on. “Given the climate, lack of clean water, large number of guests, and sustained duration of ancient wedding feasts, the lack of wine at this wedding was a serious problem. The inability to provide what the guests needed was a failure in hospitality that would bring shame on the wedding hosts. We may read the story and wonder why the family of the [wedding couple] failed to provide enough wine. However, it was ancient custom for guests to bring wedding gifts in the form of food and drink to share the burden of providing for such a large group.

Thus, the family's lack of wine may indicate a lack of community support in addition to their own lack of resources (Lindsey Scott)."

Huh. I bet all of us went to blame the family for their lack of provision, but had we considered that the lack also arose from the lack of community support at this wedding. Often, we do this when we judge those who don't have enough, or don't do things the way we think they should. We entirely blame the recipient of care, without much consideration for the community's role in the person's problems. It was true in Jesus' day just as it is in ours that it takes a village. We all have a role to play. Figuring out what it ours to do is tougher, but it 's a necessary step to faithful participation and partnership with God's action in the world.

The story then gives us the exchange between Jesus and his mother. There's a lot of conjecture about what went on here, but the text seems to indicate that Jesus was either bothered by his mother's request, or he was working to protect the servants and others who would be held responsible for no more wine. Jesus *always* looks to the one who will be scapegoated and stands up for them. Anyway, "An embarrassing squabble with one's mother in front of friends is a seminal human experience, after all. Or maybe this whole conversation is a teasing ruse because mother and son both know what is about to happen—they are both in on the delightful surprise (McManus-Dail)." "No matter how this conversation goes down—sassy or sincere," writes Lizzie McManus-Dail, "—I picture Mary, unblinking and Jesus' insistence that his hour has not yet come. She turns to the crowd of befuddled waitstaff as she saunters off with: 'Do whatever he tells you.'"

What does he tell them to do? He orders the waitstaff to get several water jars. I don't know if you realize it, but these jars were not just any jars. They were for ritual cleansing before a meal. They were usually used to cleans or absolve. Further, filling six stone water jars to the brim, each holding twenty to thirty gallons, would take somewhere around 120 to 180 gallons of water – which we know became wine. And not just any wine...the best wine. But I get ahead of myself.

“Behold Jesus’ debut act of ministry,” writes McManus-Dail. “It is not a healing, or an exorcism, or turning tables for justice. Jesus’ first act is to help ensure a party becomes the best party possible. It’s a total surprise.”

She continues:

Because this...this is who Jesus is. Jesus doesn't have to begin with defeating evil because he knows ultimately evil doesn't stand a chance against a God who loves disco and his mother. Evil doesn't stand a chance against a God who will never let an empty cistern or a full tomb have the final word. Evil is predictable. But our God loves a surprise because God knows the lot twist is the same every time: God's goodness will overflow. Every single time.

Lindsey Scott takes us back to Isaiah 55 to make the same point. Isaiah 55 is a prophecy in which those who will hear are invited to enjoy wine without price. The invitation is accompanied by a declaration from God that the word goes out from God's mouth and will not return empty but will accomplish God's purposes. In the writings of the prophets Joel and Amos, we are reminded that the abundance of wine figures as an...image of restoration, particularly for Israel. The prophet Hosea uses marriage as a metaphor for God's covenant with Israel (and us. Hosea 2: 14-23). That's just the surface of what our scriptures have to say about this God. God's love and God's goodness will overflow every

single time. It's we who are stingy and counting the cost. God's extravagance will not fit on a ledger sheet. And if that isn't good news, I don't know what is.

The scriptures aren't finished. Isaiah 55: 1-2 tell us that there is a free feast with an open invitation to all. Later in John's Gospel, Jesus washes the feet of the disciples reminded them to "love one another" (John 13:31-35). And even later, John tells us that the goal of this love is that the whole world might be reconciled to God (John 17: 20-23). "God's abundant provision of life," writes Lindsey Scott, "goes beyond anticipated boundaries."

The good news is so good it catches us by surprise. The good news of today's text is this: "there is still more. The good wine has been saved for last. God's love is so good it will never run dry." What a great gift from a loving God. Now what are we going to do with it? Will we surprise ourselves and others? Or are we content with another nice Bible story? There is never any question about what God is up to. Perhaps the problems of scarcity, judgment, hatred, violence, and dehumanization then arise somewhere else and with someone else.

I'll remind you again, "Evil is predictable. But our God love a surprise because God knows the plot twist is the same every time: God's goodness will overflow. Every single time."

Praise God! Amen.