

The Good News Isso good it catches us by surprise

Southminster Presbyterian Church

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

Opening Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be pleasing unto You our Rock and our Redeemer.

Sermon

Welcome to Lent. We've talked some about the practices of lent . . . it's historically a time of fasting, but that fasting can be self-defined to include what's most helpful for your reflection and preparation for the coming high holy days of Easter.

In the early church, these weeks of Lent . . . and these weeks run from now until Easter which falls on April 5 this year . . . these weeks of Lent were used for preparation for baptism for those who were new converts. During this time they would attend classes to learn more fully the teachings and creeds of the emerging church.

Today we begin our lenten journey with a story of joy and delight. Jesus is at a wedding reception. It must have been someone well-known and loved in the community. It's a big party. People are having a good time. They are a community that loves their wine. And then the most horrible thing happens—they run out of wine! How did they not plan this better?

Years ago my family and I attended a wedding. It was a lovely young couple. We had two small kids at the time and we were seated at a table that had other young kids. The caterers went from table to table inviting them to go to the beautiful buffet. The caterers must not have ever had young children. They

invited all the tables around us, but we with our hungry children waited and waited and waited. Desperate for anything to put in the kids' mouths. Finally our turn came. We were indeed last. We maintained a facade of calm, but we were desperate to get to that buffet.

We had seen the food go by on others' plates. It all looked so good. And the salmon looked delicious. My kids loved salmon, so this was going to erase the memory of the long, hungry wait.

When we got to the buffet, we were mystified. There was no salmon left. There was no chicken. The salads were down to the dregs. We took a deep breath and took a few rolls and butter and headed back to our table wondering how the kids would do the rest of the time.

The bride and groom graciously made their way around to the tables. They came and chatted at our table. As they left, the bride said, feel free to go back for seconds . . . I think there's more. And then was off to the next table.

The bride and groom are supposed to be protected from the truths of what goes wrong at their wedding—it should be all joy. But those in the background...the caterers and servers, are supposed to have planned well and then be problem solving.

In our passage today, the bride and groom are surely carefree and joyful, along with the many guests. But the servers and the wine steward are panicking. Maybe the flowers had cost more than expected. Maybe the wine delivery got delayed—they got that message from Amazon saying the order is behind schedule but should be there in a couple days. Maybe the out-of-town relatives unexpectedly showed up en masse. Something did not go to plan.

And somehow mother Mary is in the know. The party is about to end sooner than planned. And the guests will all know they ran out of wine. They won't talk about the beautiful ceremony or the amazing flowers or the dance floor. Their wedding will be the one that ran out of wine. It will be embarrassing. The couple might withhold payment to the caterers. They'll never be hired again.

But Mary knows what to do. Was she a quiet presence, noticing those who were meant to be invisible? However she knew, she went to her son. Fix it! He pushes back. My time has not yet come. Perhaps with a wink and a shrug, she tells the servants to do whatever he says. Like a cute little power play.

Jesus sees empty water jugs, tells the servants to fill them with water. They fill them to the brim. After all, Mary said to do whatever he says and they dare not do otherwise given the emergency.

When the wine steward tastes the wine, it's the best wine of the night. People are tipsy and most probably won't notice. It's so good, it's almost a waste! But what kind of God would provide inferior wine!?! But get this. The wine Jesus provided . . . it was the equivalent of more than 1,000 bottles of wine! You have never seen an electric slide like the ones that followed this miracle! The partiers could now party the night away. But to those present, they didn't even know. They weren't even aware that there had been a hospitality emergency.

But what else did this miracle accomplish?

Perhaps Jesus got that the crises was going to be inconvenient and embarrassing to the hosts, but it was going to be hardest on those who were invisible to the party. The servers. The planners. In this miracle, he provided joy to the wedding attendees and he provided protection to the workers.

He used water jugs that were used to hold water regularly used for ritual purification to hold the wine. He prioritized joy over ritual.

Remember that Jesus and his contemporaries are living under Roman rule. We've talked about how brutal this Roman administration could be. And the Jewish community featured at this wedding were not living their best life day-to-day. They lived in fear. They could be conscripted at

any moment to carry a load for any roman soldier. The Romans liked to make a show of their power and were happy to do it at the expense of the Jews. It is exhausting to live in a culture of fear.

When I ask in various places for people to share their highlights and lowlights, often I refer to them as roses and thorns, various things are mentioned. But I'm not sure I've been in a group setting where the current political landscape is not mentioned. We increasingly feel the load of injustice—even those of us who are in the majority, let alone those who are immigrants or people of color, even if citizens.

And fear feeds on fear. It's a cruel reality that the fear created actually causes more fear unless we actively work against it.

Together Lab, the non-profit doing education and training for clergy and faith communities, had some suggestions to work against that fear. One piece that continues to stick with me is the idea that joy is an act of resistance. In the face of oppression or fear mongering, creating joy is an act of resistance.

They also talk about taking up space as resistance. Those who rule by fear value isolation. When we are alone, we are apt to feel less powerful and more diminished.

When our nation was enslaving people and creating an economy fully based on fear and debasement of an entire

people group, those enslaved created moments of resistance even in the midst of their backbreaking, unjust work. In the midst of a culture of oppression and fear, they sang songs of joy and hope. Swing Low, Sweet Chariot. Go Down, Moses. Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen. Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child. Down to the River to Pray. Ain't Gonna Study War No More. By singing them together, they fought being isolated. They worked against a joyless existence. In the midst of radical injustice, they demonstrated fierce resistance.

As a church, we will choose to show up. We will choose to use our power and our privilege. We will listen to God's call on us. We will go to rallies. We will deliver food to schools. We will walk neighborhoods to help kids get to school. We will blow whistles. We will provide a presence at the ICE headquarters. We will accompany people. We will because we can and we must.

We will also create joy. Small or large, we will create joy. We will have a game night and invite friends. We will host an art show to say that in the midst of fear, beauty has power. We will knit or crochet hats and wear them, not because they are an answer, but because we do not want people to think we are okay with the forces that are seeking to grow in power.

Jesus was probably a busy guy. But he showed up at a community celebration because joy matters. Jesus wasn't ready to be known for his divine nature . . . it was still a

secret. But when his mom outed him, he went all in and provided enough wine for several events as if to say, “we’re not going to be satisfied with enough. If you try to steal our joy, we’re going to multiply it!”

Joy comes in connection. Joy comes in surprise. Joy is sometimes unexpected, sometimes planned, and often a combination of both.

In this season of Lent, let’s look for joy. Let’s plan for joy. Let’s release joy. Let’s spread joy. It’s the path laid out for us by Jesus. Let’s do it.

Amen.