

I love weddings. I've not yet had the privilege in my short pastoral career of baptizing anyone but I can't imagine anything else that might rival the honor and joy of being asked to officiate at a wedding. I actually performed my first two weddings at a time in my life when I had no intention of becoming a pastor, but I'd been licensed to the gospel ministry years before by a Southern Baptist church and that was good enough for the states of Kentucky and Texas and the couples in question were personal friends who wanted me, specifically, to do the honors and I was glad to agree. I've performed weddings in gardens, in a private home, in a hotel banquet room, in a university chapel, everywhere, in fact, but in a church. But they've all been joyous occasions and I hope that everyone in attendance felt the blessing of God on those occasions as strongly as I did.

And while officiating at a wedding is a special joy, I enjoy just going to weddings. I don't get to be a "civilian" at weddings very often now that I'm a pastor. Even at my sister-in-law's big, fat Catholic wedding in St. Peters Cathedral in Belleville, Illinois, this past fall, I got pressed into service to offer the blessing of the happy couple at the reception when the officiating priest was late getting to the party. Colleen's even warned me that when she finds the right guy (and is of appropriate age – somewhere around 30 would be my preference), then I'll have to do double duty, giving her away and performing the ceremony. But on those occasions when I do get to just sit and watch, I'm still uplifted by the pervading sense of hope, joy and love that are always present.

Those three themes are strong in our scriptures for this morning as well, which makes a nice link back to three of our Advent themes – hope, love and joy – as well as to our Epiphany theme of the continued revealing of Jesus as the Christ – the anointed of God who carries the Good News. In Isaiah's vision of a marriage between God and God's people and in the story of Jesus' "first sign," as John puts it, at the wedding in Cana, we find the joy of new beginnings, the hope of a new relationship between creation and Creator, and both the promise of love and the call to love. The consummation of these three, though not referenced directly in these passages, is surely peace, and there is the return to our fourth Advent theme, in case you were wondering why I didn't name it earlier.

Let's start with the passage from Isaiah, a vision of great hope for God's people who were exiled and in desperate need of a word of hope when this message came to them. The prophet says God will not rest, God will keep working on the people's behalf, until Israel's proper place is restored, until, as the Episcopalian scholar Chris Haslam puts it, "it will break forth with the suddenness of dawn in the desert – there one moment it is dark, and the next light." There's another great light image for this season of Epiphany, by the way. The promise of God is that everyone will see the glory of God's people, that they will no longer be known as Forsaken, the ones from a land called Desolate, but that instead they will carry a new name from God: Hephzibah, My Delight is in Her, and they will live in a land called Married, or Beulah Land, as the old hymn reminds us.

The hope in this passage is firmly rooted in a concept of commitment that Isaiah's audience could fully understand. The image of marriage between God and God's people carries with it the promise of eternal faithfulness. Even today, some couples choose to end their wedding vows with those archaic words from the Book of Common Prayer, "and thereto I plight thee my troth."

To “plight one’s troth,” to pledge one’s truth, in other words, is to seal the promises made with the most solemn vow. It is to say, “if I fail to keep my promises to you, then there is no truth in me.” We understand, of course, that promises made between two human beings are often broken, for we are broken people, and that, like all our brokenness, this too can be forgiven and healed by the love of God through Christ Jesus. But these words in Isaiah are God plighting God’s troth to God’s people. This is God saying to Israel and to us, who are the branch grafted onto the tree, as Paul puts it, that God will never forsake us, that God will always love us, that God takes delight in us. Some of us began a study of The Song of Songs on Wednesday night, two weeks ago, a study that we’ll resume in March because of the interruptions of weather and previous commitments. We spent some time discussing whether that glorious poem was best understood as a literal love story, as an allegory of God’s love for God’s people, or as a little of both. In this brief reading from Isaiah, we find further evidence of the passion of God for God’s creation being linked to the passion that brings two people together in marriage.

From the hope of a future wedding and an expression of a love promised, we turn to the joy of love fulfilled, the story of a wedding party in progress. As Charlie Scalise pointed out in our Adult Sunday School last week about this passage, the weddings in Palestine at the time of Jesus often lasted for days. We don’t know the whole background of this story, how it was that Mary was there, whether Jesus was invited with all his disciples or whether they were party crashers, how it came to happen that the wine ran out, but there they were and the wine did indeed run out and Mary knew her son could do something about it. Now, a lot of preachers in a lot of Baptist churches all across America have a lot of problems with preaching from this story. They feel they either have to justify Jesus’ actions in the light of the Temperance Movement or that they have to deal with the ramifications of alcoholism in modern culture. With your permission, I’m going to sidestep both of those complex topics for two reasons. First, this is a story from another culture, a culture of agrarian peasants where good food and wine were in short supply and reserved for very special times of celebration, unlike 21st Century America where both are in such abundance that the problems of overeating and over-drinking can flourish. Second, this story links to an idiom common in scriptures, where the abundance of wine is linked to the joy that awaits God’s people in the messianic kingdom. In Isaiah, we read, “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines.” Both Amos and Joel promise that in the fulfilled kingdom of God, “The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.”

Indeed, this story of Jesus seems to be a sort of embodiment of many of the stories Jesus told about the Kingdom of God being like a wedding banquet. The Book of Revelation also picks up this theme in John’s vision of the announcement of the wedding of the Lamb. There is no doubt that our spiritual heritage promises that the fulfilled life with God will be like a party for us! Even our Psalm this morning picks up on the image. Did you notice? “Your people find refuge in the shelter of your wings. They feast on the riches of your house; they drink from the stream of your delight.” One of the reasons that I love weddings is that there is always a great party! Even if it’s only punch and cookies in the church basement, the celebration of the hope and joy of new beginnings and of the love of the married couple makes the party truly special and joyous and memorable. That’s the kind of party that gives us a glimpse into what life can be like, what God always wants our lives to be like. Perhaps that’s why some scholars believe that when John calls this “the first of Jesus’ signs,” he means not only that it was chronologically first, but also

that it was pre-eminent, that it gives deep insight into the whole meaning of his ministry, up to and including his death on the cross. Everything else that Jesus said and did, in this understanding, was to bring humankind closer to the realization of God's passionate love and the celebration that human life was and is meant to be. A retired UCC pastor, Jack Good, writes, "(Jesus') coming-out event was a party within a party, a celebration within a celebration. The work of Jesus began in a life-affirming setting. The sign of his ministry would be wine, a symbol of human conviviality and gladness." The Westminster Catechism, used by our Presbyterian brothers and sisters since the 1640s, has an important lesson for us about this great party of life with God, which seems a little odd when one considers the stern reputation of Scottish Calvinists but perhaps makes it all the more significant. The Catechism is used to teach the basics of the faith and consists of 107 questions and answers, the first of which is: "*Q. What is the chief end of man? A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.*" What a delightful concept! God loves us, let's enjoy God and God's love!

There are many, many other wonderful images and ideas in this short miracle tale that we could grapple with today but the last one I want to look at is actually not even mentioned in John's account. That's because it would have been simply understood by everyone in his original audience. In a little village like Cana, if there was a wedding, everyone in town came. It was a community event. For me, that idea combines with the use of the wedding party elsewhere in the New Testament as a metaphor for the messianic kingdom, the Kingdom of God. Everyone is invited to the Kingdom. A few months ago, *Sojourners* magazine printed an excerpt from a book by Brian McLaren, titled The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything. McLaren, by the way, is one of the most prominent theologians of the postmodern Emerging Church movement and was named by *Time* magazine as one of its "25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America." McLaren's article suggested that the phrase "the Kingdom of God" has become meaningless or worse for 21st Century Americans and that we need to find a new way of expressing what Jesus was talking about. One of his suggestions was that we learn to talk about not the Kingdom of God, but the Party of God. "The Kingdom of God," he writes, "is like a street party to which everybody is invited." It's a great, contemporary picture for us of this same story in John – a party to which everybody is invited.

There's another metaphor that holds that same idea of joy and inclusivity and until I looked up McLaren's article again when I was writing this, I could have sworn that he'd mentioned it, but he didn't. He did, however cite the person most identified with the metaphor, so I guess that's what made me think of it. In discussing the now and future reality of the Party of God or the Kingdom of God, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often used the phrase, "the Beloved Community." It's a phrase that holds a good deal of meaning for me and one that I use quite often, as you may have noticed. I like it because it reminds me that there is both a blessing and a call to being part of the Kingdom, the Party of God. It reminds me that we are loved with a great love and that we are called to extend that love to all. God loves each one of us with an intensity reserved in human experience for the intimate relationship of two persons but we are not individuals in relationship with God but a community. God invites all and God both expects and empowers us to love all.

Dr. King wrote eloquently on the blessing and call of this love, pointing out how the Greek of our New Testament allows us to differentiate this holy and unselfish kind of love from both

phileo, or brotherly love, and *eros*, or sexual love. “The Greek language,” he wrote in a 1957 sermon, “comes out with another word for Love - it is the word *agape*.... It is a love that seeks nothing in return. It is an overflowing Love; it’s what theologians would call the love of God working in the lives of men. And when you rise to love on this level, you begin to love men not because they are likeable, but because God loves them... And you refuse to do anything that would defeat an individual because you have *agape* in your soul.”

The concept of the Beloved Community, as I think I’ve mentioned here before, was not original to Dr. King but to Josiah Royce, a theologian who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Dr. King, however, certainly brought the phrase into wider usage and most who use it first discover it in King’s writings. In thinking of the Beloved Community, Dr. King wrote, concerning the Montgomery Bus Boycott, “the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.” Ten years later, after many accomplishments that were hailed as triumphs of political or economic justice, he wrote, “I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are ingredients in the objective that we seek in life. And I think that end or that objective is a truly brotherly society, the creation of the beloved community.”

50 years after the desegregation of the Montgomery buses, nearly 40 years after Dr. King’s death, we are still struggling to realize his dream of racial equality and justice here in America. Nearly two millennia after the death of Jesus, we are still praying for God’s Kingdom, God’s great Wedding Party, to come on Earth as it is in Heaven. But the Good News is that even in our failures, God loves us. Even in our brokenness, God loves us. Even in our sinfulness and rebellion, God loves us. God loves us so much that it is possible for us to be infected by that love, to be inspired by that love, to be empowered by that love to love one another. The whole world may not realize yet that it is invited into the Beloved Community but we know that we have been invited. We know that we have been invited and it is up to us to invite others in, to bind wounds that we or that others have inflicted, to offer water to the thirsty mouths and to the thirsty souls.

Jesus turned the water into wine so that the wedding party could continue and the celebration could go on. The Good News is that the party is still going on. Not only are we invited, it is our party! The message of the Good News of Jesus Christ is that this is our big, fat, blessed wedding, that the Creator of the Universe wants to claim you and you and me as His special one and that the family we are marrying into is made up of all believers everywhere. Man, what a great party! Thanks be to God!