

Come to the Party

John 2:1-11

Crossroads Christian Church

Isaiah 62:1-5

Jan. 17, 2016 Epiphany 2C

Some of you might remember that before I became an interim minister, I worked at Christian Board of Publication for over 20 years. Early on, I was a youth editor, and a member of a youth staff team, composed of national youth ministry staff workers from several mainline denominations— Disciples, American Baptists, Presbyterians, UCC, and several others. We met twice a year, usually at a church retreat center, to plan ecumenical youth events and resources. We always found time to have an evening out on the town, to have a good meal, and to have fun. One year we hosted the meeting in St. Louis. We ate at a Mexican restaurant, and stopped afterward for dessert at an ice cream parlor. We were being good natured, just a bit rowdy, and laughing a lot. In the midst of all our fun, two older ladies approached, with smiles on their faces.

“You’re part of a church group, right?” asked one. I answered, “Yes, we are. We’re not from just one church, but from all across the country. What made you think that we were a church group?”

“Well,” she said. “You were having a lot of fun, but nobody was being mean or anything. You just acted like a group of Christians having a really nice time.” The other lady piped up, “Yeah, I’d like to know what church you belong to, because I just might join.” The First Church of Good Parties, I guess.

“If the church were like that, I’d join.” If the church lived like it believed, that God so loved the world that he sent Jesus Christ to save it, that God was like the welcoming father hugging the prodigal son and throwing a party in his honor, if the church really believed that the Good News was good news and acted accordingly, every sanctuary would be filled. I recently read an article that divided congregations into “come and see” churches, and “Go and tell” churches. “Come and see” churches, like us, may have wonderful fellowship and mission to attract others, but are disappointed when others don’t come and see. “Go and tell” churches, where members invite their friends and families, are more likely to grow.¹

There’s a party going on and we have to let people know. Isaiah talked that language, talking about a formerly desolate Israel being the bride at God’s wedding feast. Jesus talked that language. “There’s a banquet hall open, the food is prepared, the wine is flowing,” said the ruler in

¹ Article by Douglas Anders in “Weekly Connection,” Illinois South Conference, UCC, January 12, 2016, based on article by Joseph Yoo.

one of Jesus' parables. "Where are my guests? Why has everybody ignored my invitations or sent excuses? Go out and find the poor, the homeless, the blind and lame, the beggars, and bring them on in!"

In John's Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry at a party—at a wedding feast. Maybe it was the wedding feast of one of his close family members, a cousin or brother or sister—we don't know. But in any case, Jesus and his followers, his disciples, were there and were enjoying the festivities.

Now a wedding party in ancient Israel was a big deal. They didn't have limos and photographers and DJs, but the party went on for days. The parents of the bride were expected to be hospitable to all comers, to have the wine, fruit, meat, everything for a good time. There would be parades and dancing in the streets. The parties would lull during the daytime, but each evening, after their hard work in their fields or on their fishing boats, people would gather again, first at the bride's family's home, later at the groom's, and continue the party.

Somewhere during that week, the wine vats ran dry. Imagine the worried little whispers in the corners, the mumbled "I tried to tell them" from the servants, the potential embarrassment and social ruin of the parents. Mary hears the news and tells her son. "Do something! Don't let this whole party go down in flames." Jesus pretended not to feel any responsibility, but his mother saw through him. She told the servants, "do whatever he tells you." You know the story—Jesus instructed the servants to fill the large water jugs used for purification and ritual washing to their very brims—with water. Then the chief steward—the wedding planner—tasted it, and wondered why the boss had saved the best wine to last, when the guests were too drunk to have a discerning palate.

We use this story a lot at weddings, to show that Jesus blessed human marriage, and that Christ's presence in our own marriages can turn the water of happiness into the wine of joy. But for John, it was even more important than that. It was the first of seven great signs that Christ would give to prove that he was the Messiah, the Son of God. Part of what John was trying to say, I think, is that the water of ordinary life was replaced by the wine of God's Spirit. A new joy, a new hope, a new excitement came that transformed life, just as Jesus transformed water into wine.

Anna Murdock has a wonderful poem that summarizes this miracle, and ties it in with the Resurrection. It's called "On the third day."

It was on the third day
when a mother heard her son

call her "Woman".
It would not be the last time.

It was on the third day
when people gathered
and with a great thirst
cried out, "What are we to do?"

It was on the third day
when the old ways of cleansing
took on a new look and fragrance.
The very best was spilled out for all.

It was on the third day
when a miracle occurred.
"Enough for everyone" was the miracle.
"Enough of the best for everyone!"

It was on the third day
when the glory of the Lord
was revealed ...
and the disciples believed.

And it was on the third day
when there was a great celebration
at a wedding in Cana ...
and at a tomb in Jerusalem ...
and within us all
forever more.²
(unquote)

Anna's poem helps us understand why the passage ends with this note: "This was the first miraculous sign that Jesus did in Cana of Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him." In other words, this wasn't just an impromptu, off-the-cuff miracle, that happened because Jesus' mom put him on the spot. It was the first of seven key miracles that witness to the divinity of Christ. Through the Gospel, John adds sign upon sign, adding up to seven, the holy number. After this story, the signs include: Healing the royal official's son in Capernaum; Healing the paralytic at Bethesda; Feeding the 5000; Jesus' walk on water; and the greatest, the Raising of Lazarus from the dead. Isn't it fascinating that the first sign should involve a

² © 2010 Anna Murdock. Posted at Midrash.com

feast, a party, a celebration? Isn't it fascinating that this story is set in Epiphany, because it so beautifully tells us of the real nature of Jesus?

We at Crossroads Christian Church have a wonderful connection with this theme of coming to the party, because we have a good time together, and we welcome other people to join in. Our church does a great job of cooking, eating food, and enjoying being together, at our meals here at the church and with donation dinners. You brought us and our family joy in hosting our 50th wedding anniversary last Summer. We as a congregation bring joy to others with creative and generous food donations at the Caseyville food bank. Next Thursday, we'll be feeding our area Disciples clergy when they have their meeting here; and the theme for that meeting is to share ideas about feeding the hungry. Next Sunday, we'll have a potluck dinner.

We in the church are the stewards of God's great and eternal party. The world's been invited to come and share in the joy. So why is it a best-kept secret? Why are we shy about it? It's good news that we share. God's throwing a big party, and it's up to us to enjoy that celebration, and it's up to us to reach out and tell others the good news. God's grace is real. God's love is offered to all. God's joy is something we can all share. Pass it on. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon

