

God's Open Bar – Judy Cox

Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

The role of “parents of the groom” has twice delighted Daryl and me! In the last five years we’ve rejoiced in celebrating, and co-hosting, the weddings of both our sons. Each time we combined forces with our son’s in-laws to throw huge, extravagant, lavishly hospitable parties; they’d focus on the evening gala, we’d focus on the endless brunch buffet the next morning. With today’s lectionary texts, we too bear witness to how well, how scripturally, the grace and love of God are reflected in the lavish abundance of the endless buffet, and, perhaps especially, the open bar.

As Dr. Brittingham reminded us on Epiphany Sunday, in this part of Isaiah God’s people, home from exile, are trapped in bewilderment and discouragement. This doesn’t look like restoration! Home again—but the devastation of generations has Jerusalem, and the land, still in ruins. Crops fail—this longed-for homeland proves barren, not fruitful. Where is the abundance??? Just as back in exile, enemies mock them for clinging to worship of God. Cruel nicknames have stuck—perhaps given insultingly, and received in hopelessness—nicknames of despair: *Azubah*, *Shemamah*—*Forsaken*, *Desolate*. Redemption and return home were to be their vindication—this still feels like punishment, or at least neglect and abandonment.

The prophet speaks for God, promising that longed-for vindication. God will vindicate them; they will know themselves beloved, not neglected, not forgotten; the surrounding nations will see how the Lord loves Israel. God’s hands embrace her, and those powerful hands will reshape her as a crown of beauty, a bridal tiara, a royal diadem. God’s own voice will rename her; no more sneering from opponents, or private despair and self-loathing. Those hope-stealing names have no reality—in their place, because the Lord delights in her, she will hear: *Hephzibah*, *My Delight-is-in-her*. The desolate land itself will become abundant and fertile once more, through restored intimacy with God—so the land’s name will be *Married*—*Beulah*, implying that generative fruitfulness. With delight and rejoicing God will lavish love on Israel, not only like us parents throwing a wedding party today, but like the bridegroom rejoices over the bride!

Isaiah joins Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel in using this marriage metaphor to express the relationship of God with God’s people. Not only marriage, but the requisite, lavishly generous wedding banquet, in particular, symbolizes the joy of messianic fulfillment, with God’s super-abundant feast of food and wine, and the mutual delight between God and God’s people. Our Psalm text gives us a taste of this conjunction: *how precious is your steadfast love, O God—all may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.*

So when the gospel according to John speaks of a wedding banquet, and a super-abundance of rich wine, John’s hearers would make a messianic connection. John brackets this passage with some explicit connections for them, and for us: in the immediately preceding verses, newly-believing Nathanael is promised that he will see *greater things than these...* and John emphasizes just how soon this Cana wedding occurs, noting: *on the third day!* John closes this section by

describing it as *the first of Jesus' signs, which revealed his glory*, with the result that *his disciples believed into him*.

As scholar Ben Witherington III notes, this sign is a nature miracle, “the manipulation of inanimate matter, changing it in some dramatic way not a part of the natural process.” The first in a series of seven sign narratives within John’s gospel, it begins what he terms “the crescendo of the miraculous,” from this changing of water into wine to the raising of Lazarus. John uses the term “sign” very explicitly, as an authentication and demonstration of God’s promises fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus’ miracles, in this gospel, are enacted parables of the Kingdom he brings through his total work; the signs reveal Jesus’ glory as the Prologue has proclaimed and defined it: *the glory of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth*.

How do you think, then, that the events at the wedding in Cana constitute a sign? Keep in mind all the Old Testament connections that “wedding banquet” would evoke in John’s hearers, and let’s join them in listening.

The happy couple might well include one of Jesus’ relatives, as Jesus, his mother, and his disciples all attend this (probably weeklong) party. Because a wedding requires lavish hospitality, we wonder if Jesus and his disciples are straining the resources of the bridegroom-host, causing the wine shortage. It helps make sense of why, when the wine gives out, Jesus’ mother would tell him. Is she as a relative embarrassed at the problem, the inability to provide full hospitality?

Jesus’ response to her puzzles us with its apparent rudeness—although the address *Woman* may not have been as rude and impersonal to them as it might seem to us. But Jesus does say something like, “What has this concern of yours to do with me?” At the least, we do hear disengagement—and that seems to be the point! He continues immediately: *my hour has not yet come*. In the theology of this gospel especially, Jesus’ HOUR is always in the Father’s control, not his own, not his mother’s. He only acts on the basis of the Father’s direction.

Let’s give Mary credit for responding not by bristling, but by deferring to Jesus, with her, *Do whatever he tells you*. Affirming his independence of both thought and action, she gives him respect and space. She trusts him to be guided by his own inner direction from the Father—may all us helicopter parents learn such graciousness!

Six stone water pots stand by, each with a capacity of 20-30 gallons—stone jars, enormous water jars for the Jewish rites of purification. Six, the number for incompleteness—falling short of the perfection of seven. Per the nitpicky regulations, if ritually contaminated, stone jars could be cleansed; clay jars, if made impure, would have to be broken. The Jewish rite of purification and all these regulations came from the Levitical laws of ritual purity and impurity. Both hands and vessels had to be washed, to cleanse them of the contagion of impurity, the ever-lurking danger threatening to separate from God.

Notice what Jesus does with this symbol of the whole Jewish purity system. In one of his most understated mighty acts, he simply says, *Fill the waterpots with water*—and they do so. The text emphasizes, they *fill them to the brim*—so 120 plus gallons! Then: *Draw some out* (no

specifying what that “some” is)...*take it* to the wedding coordinator. The astounded reaction of that chief steward reveals the extravagant miracle; in place of the water for endless, anxious washings Jesus provides extravagant abundance of wine, outstanding in quality, overwhelming in quantity. We and the disciples know, where the steward does not, that Jesus has fulfilled the role of bridegroom and host at this wedding banquet. God’s messianic Kingdom is come!

Full of grace and truth, John’s Prologue says of Jesus; *of his fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.* With all of John’s audience we are to catch how the fullness of Jesus’ grace fills up what is lacking in the purity-based rituals. With them we see, in Jesus, the messianic fulfillment of all God’s promises, the full revelation of God’s lavish, abundant love poured out on and for all. Jesus serves at God’s open bar, stocking it so generously that it will never run out, opening it to all who thirst. He provides abundantly more than we can ask or imagine.

Who are we in these texts today? Are we desolate Israel? Too often we give way to despair, and claim the name “Forsaken,” forgetting that God in Christ delights in us, loving us lavishly. Are we the wedding coordinator, rejoicing in the goodness of the gifts, but failing to attribute them to Jesus? We can recognize God’s good gifts without recognizing their source in the love of God found in Jesus our Lord! Or are we the disciples, who catch the meaning of this sign? Seeing in it Jesus’ glory revealed, as God’s Son, they *believe into* him, put their whole trust in him. Will we, like them, put all our trust in Him, who is the fulfillment of all God is with and for us?

There’s yet another person in our text who clamors for our notice, our recognition today. Just Thursday evening, on this week leading up to MLK Day, we of St. Paul’s received what felt like a benediction and a challenge. Race and reconciliation consultant Anthony Bobo, after hearing our story regarding the “Black Lives Matter” sign, and our journey to and with it, named us a *city on a hill* which cannot be hidden, a light called to shine. He affirmed our sense that this is our gift, that we have been called to offer hospitality through this sign, even when it makes us vulnerable.

These texts today emphasize God’s lavish, abundantly gracious hospitality, manifested supremely in the person and work of Jesus. With Anthony’s words still echoing, I most of all find us in that human bridegroom, also called to hospitality, who so fell short. Where his resources proved shamefully inadequate, Jesus provided—abundantly. We too WANT to offer full hospitality! We seek to give what we have, the best we know how. In the end, though, our human resources run out; we confess that, in our own strength, we run embarrassingly dry. Without the divine supply to draw on, our love and our strength prove inadequate. Only God’s own love poured into our hearts, the Pentecostal wine of the Spirit of Christ, if you will, can equip us to respond to this calling. We can only stay this course of ours by God’s grace.

As always in our worship, we move from Word to Table; today we realize anew why we call it the Lord’s Table. We remember that Jesus’ hour, the hour of suffering, death and glorification, did come. In that hour, and eternally, he becomes our Bridegroom and our Host. He provides not the “blood of the grape,” as the Torah refers to wine, but his own blood, the wine of the Spirit. He hosts us with and on His very self, his body and his blood. He knows our limitations—he

entered into them with and for us—and provides, in his own self, super-abundantly more than we can ask or imagine, this wine that gladdens, that nourishes, that cleanses, that empowers us. So we are invited, by him, to receive his resources, to CELEBRATE this feast he provides so abundantly for us!