

*This I Know for Sure:
Life Is Like a Wedding Banquet*
John 2:1-11

It is good to finally be here. For more than three months I've known I was coming to LAUMC; you've known the names of new pastors coming for about the same length of time. For even longer than that, you've known that pastors you know and have loved would be leaving; that your church would be in transition. It's unsettling, I know. With all the uncertainty in the world, reasons to mistrust the wisdom and even the goodwill of institutions and authorities, *your church* is the last place you want to feel like the ground under your feet can shift unpredictably. I get it.

I too have some anxieties. I suspect every new pastor has them: Will you notice anything other than my "otherness", my unfamiliarity with the ways you're used to doing things? Will the commitments we share as Christians and United Methodists be enough to get us through an inevitable period of unfamiliarity and adjustment? Will we find the kind of purpose and love for one another and passion for the world that will make this time in the life of LAUMC what I hope it will be: not just OK, but thriving and strong and fruitful?

There are some things I know for sure about this moment. Every change, chosen or not, brings both loss and a new beginning. Every new beginning offers us both opportunity and challenge. Hope always includes some measure of fear, the possibility that the future will hold something other than what you've imagined.

And so it seemed particularly appropriate to use as the text for today another 'beginning' story. From the story of Jesus, his first miracle—at least as the Gospel writer John told the story. Others—Mark, Matthew, Luke—remembered Jesus' life slightly differently. They mentioned other things first when they were trying to communicate who Jesus was for them. But John, who was the clearest of the four Gospel writers about knowing that Jesus was the presence of God's very self on earth, chose to begin with a miracle that Jesus did at a wedding he attended in Cana.

Jesus was there with his mother. We know that because she's a speaking character in this story. So—maybe a family wedding? A cousin, or a family friend, maybe someone Jesus had grown up with? We don't know exactly; but here's what we know about every wedding—then and now. Weddings are a universal human ritual. In every culture, weddings are occasions for big gatherings. They're full of joy, music and dancing, friends and family, flowers and food and drink. And why not? What could be more life-affirming and hopeful than one person's commitment, out into the unknown future, to be a faithful and constant presence in another person's life? A wedding is a 'yes' moment in life. It feels solid and hopeful—not only to the people who make that promise, but to the ones who are there to watch.

So we can imagine into this story good feeling and lots of frivolity. This wedding goes late into the night. The caterer notices that they are running out of wine. Oh-oh. A disappointment, but not necessarily a catastrophe...most hosts probably would have just let the party wind down and see the guests drift off toward home.

But Mary, Jesus' mother, notices. She pulls Jesus aside, away from all the dancers, and says to him, "They have no wine;" thereby demonstrating two character traits that are perhaps universally and timelessly true of mothers. First, she has this deep internal need to make things right for other people. She is not the host of this wedding. The wine shortage is not her problem, but somehow she feels responsible. Secondly, she has unlimited confidence in her son. Who does she think he is, and why does she think *he* can do anything about the wine situation? I can just imagine the way Jesus looked back at her. You know—that look children give their mothers when they ask them to show off, that look that says, "Mom, stop—you're embarrassing me!" But Mary is unstoppable, and she goes right on. Go ahead, she says to the servants; do whatever he asks you to do.

So maybe Jesus rolls his eyes once more, but then he looks around and sees six ordinary stone jars—big ones, that hold 20 or 30 gallons each. These jars were not intended for wine at all. They're for water to wash people's hands and feet—water that doesn't even have to be drinking quality. So that's maybe 150 gallons all together, when the jars are filled up with water. *150 gallons*. Think about how many milk cartons *that* is.

And suddenly, all that water is wine. And not just any wine. The finest wine they've tasted all night. Enough to go around, and around, and around again. Enough so that this wedding banquet can go on for several more hours. Enough to make it a party that no one will ever forget.

John tells us this story first intentionally. He makes *this* miracle the tone-setting story of Jesus' life on earth. And then, to make it even clearer that this is a story with significance, to *underline* its importance to understanding who Jesus is, John begins his telling of the story with four words that have always, always resonated for Christians, words that ought to always make us stand up and pay attention when we read them in the Bible: "*On the third day...*" On the third day after Jesus' death, he rose. On the third day after Jesus' baptism, he turned water into wine.

Why this story? What about a wedding, and a water-into-wine miracle, made *this* such an important starting place?

For John, the coming of Jesus was the very entrance of God into this world. God moving into our neighborhood, setting up to live this life, with us. John was saying: The kingdom of God—God here with us—ought to feel like a wedding banquet. When Jesus is with you, among you, it's like good wine that flows endlessly. It's like you are surrounded by family and friends, celebrating a moment that is very special, full of hope.

And indeed, this miracle—like all of Jesus’ illustrations of the kingdom of God— was characterized by abundance. Nothing pinched or scarce or fearful in this picture. The image here is about overflowing, maybe even excess. Not just enough wine for another glass, but 150 gallons. Not just enough bread to feed the hungry crowds, but enough for twelve baskets left over. Not just a plant that a tiny mustard seed can grow into, but a tree so big that all the birds can nest in it. A land *flowing* with milk and honey. A banquet that *everyone* is invited to—no conditions, no exclusions. This is the life Jesus came to offer. This is what life lived in the kingdom of God feels like. Open. Joyful. Generous. Freely shared.

Versions of this miracle happen over and over again in the Gospel story. Everyone is fed. No one is turned away. Ordinary bread and juice become soul-sustaining nourishment. The ordinary things in our lives become instruments of holiness and love.

You and I both know that life can feel more discouraging than that. I doubt it will surprise you if I say that the reality of every life, and life in every church, is something short of an eternal wedding celebration. But every new beginning is a chance to re-gather and see from a different perspective; to peel off another one of those sets of blinders that keep us from seeing that here is holiness all around us. This beginning is a moment of invitation for you and for me: to give up some things that are familiar but might have become a little constraining. To readjust our hopes; to look up and see that the horizon is further out there than we thought.

But I also know that it will take some time for us to get to know one another, and for you to trust me as your pastor. In our United Methodist system, this union of our futures is more like an arranged marriage than it is the culmination of a romantic courtship. We not only had a matchmaker who suggested we might enjoy each other’s company; we had a Bishop who said, “Here’s the person with whom you will exchange rings.”

Sociologists of American religion say that pastoral appointment systems like the United Methodist one have about the same success rate as denominations that use a system of interviews and auditions. That’s about the same conclusion that anthropologists have drawn about the success and failure rates of marriages in cultures with arranged marriage traditions, as opposed to marriages for love. In our Western culture, we expect love to come first. Only later is it followed by a commitment to nurture and sustain that love over a lifetime. In an arranged marriage, the commitment comes first. The expectation is that affection and concern, and even love, can grow later. What’s different between those two marriage systems is the sequence of steps by which a commitment is cemented. But the success of either kind of marriage depends on the same thing: a commitment to stay together, even when there are hard days along the way or better-looking options around the corner.

That’s the kind of commitment we are making to one another. To be in ministry together, each of us with our own gifts and strengths and needs and roles. We are making that commitment before we know each other very well. We are committing ourselves to a

marriage of our intentions and goals and faith journeys, trusting that we will learn to love each other along the way.

One of the things I sometimes say during wedding ceremonies is that even though it's a terrible idea to think you can change your marriage partner, the paradox of marriage is that it *is* a process of transformation. Marriage changes us, and not necessarily in the ways we had hoped for or imagined. A good marriage is one that requires you to stretch your ideas about who you are. Your best partner not only comforts, but challenges you; draws you into becoming not only who you wanted to be, but the person you *can* be. Marriage is a commitment to let yourself be shaped and polished by words and actions you'd probably never say to yourself. And the great responsibility of marriage and partnership is that you too are invested with the power to shape someone else's life.

In a very real sense, this is the commitment and the responsibility we take on as we begin this new chapter in the life of Los Altos United Methodist Church. To build a strong marriage, a marriage that will multiply the good that is already in each of us. To shape something that is more than the sum of our individual parts. We have been brought together for the turning of water into wine, for the wedding banquet that celebrates God's lavish presence and love in this place.