Sunday, January 15, 1995
WINE AND WEDDINGS
John 2:1-11

“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.'”

One of the reasons officiating at church weddings is so interesting is that there are so many unpredictable things that can happen. Running out of refreshments at the reception is only one of them. I could write a small book on the unusual incidents that have taken place in weddings where I have officiated — some very humorous and others tragic.

The groom or bride might misplace the marriage license, so the ceremony needs to be delayed until it is found. A too-young ring bearer or flower girl decides not to stand where he or she is supposed to and instead begins to wander around the chancel. A member of the wedding party faints.

At one wedding, a bug came out of the flowers behind me and began buzzing around my head. One of the wedding rings was dropped and rolled away. The minister might mistakenly say to the groom, “Do you, Walter, take Mary as your husband?” Or the minister addresses the bride or groom with the wrong first name.

The most surprising thing that ever happened to me during a wedding ceremony took place in St. Louis, more than 25 years ago. It was a second marriage for both the bride and groom. The bride’s first husband had died several years earlier while still quite young, and it had been a slow, lingering death. As their pastor, I had become quite close to them during the long illness. The groom’s first wife had also died a few years earlier. At the end of the ceremony, the usual practice is for the bride and groom to kiss each other. In this case, however, the bride first embraced me and then kissed me squarely on the mouth before she kissed the groom.

In every culture, weddings are occasions for celebration. This past August, while in Moscow, Russia, over a weekend, we saw numerous wedding parties taking place. One of the most fascinating occurred on a Sunday morning in the largest Baptist Church in Moscow. The tradition for many Christians in Russia is to first be married by a state official at the local state wedding hall — that’s required, and many of these weddings take place on a Sunday morning. The couple then proceeds to attend the worship service at their church, along with the other members of the wedding party and their families. Following the worship service, a religious marriage ceremony takes place in front of the congregation.

In this religious ceremony, there were two different times when, for some reason, the minister, who was a man, kissed the groom on the mouth and not the bride.

In the Jewish culture of Jesus’ time, weddings were grand religious and social occasions. The celebration lasted many days, giving the newlyweds an opportunity to be honored by their family members and neighbors. There was always plenty of wine to serve along with other refreshments. In the story found in the Gospel of John, the wine ran out while the celebration was still underway, and this would have been very embarrassing to the host families.

Incidentally, many Biblical scholars believe that either the bride or the groom, or perhaps both, were relatives of Jesus' family in some way. That would explain why Mary, perhaps in the role of a favorite aunt, took it upon herself to try to solve the problem of the lack of wine.

What a relief it must have been for Mary when she looked up to see that her son, Jesus, had arrived to enjoy the wedding celebration. He would know what to do. With confidence, she presented the problem to him: "They have run out of wine." There were no instructions to him about how to deal with the problem, only a statement of fact.

We know the rest of the story. There were six large stone jars in the room that were normally used to hold water for the Jewish ritual of purification. Jesus asked the servants to fill these with water. Then he asked them to take some of the water to the caterer in charge of the reception. When this person tasted the water now made wine, he did not know its source. So he called the bridegroom and said, "Usually everyone I know puts the good wine out first, and then when the guests have had plenty to drink, he brings out the cheaper wine, but you have kept the best wine until now."

Sometimes we miss the main point of stories like this one because we ask the wrong questions. We wonder, did it really happen exactly as the writer has recorded it? Was the water actually turned into wine, or did it only seem like wine to those present?

It's better first to ask, why was this story remembered by the early church and included in the Gospel of John when other stories about Jesus were forgotten? What did it tell them, and what does it tell us about Jesus and his ministry? What does it have to say to us about the nature of our faith?

What does it have to tell us about God's relationship to us and to the whole creation?

First of all, the story was remembered and written down by the early church because it reminded them that whenever Jesus was present, he added something extra. He made the tired world seem alive again.
We all know people like that — people who, by their presence, seem to add something special to the group — water is made into wine. When they are present, what seems dull and tasteless takes on a new character, a new flavor.

On the other hand, there are also individuals who seem to have the opposite effect on a group or on us as individuals — wine is made into water. They know how to douse a warm glow. They know how to add gloom to an event that is happy. They walk around with a cloud over their heads.

This process of people affecting people goes on all the time. We human beings constantly issue unique and powerful invitations to each other to live or die, to triumph or surrender, to take a positive view of life or a negative one.

Some individuals seem to kill the dream, paralyze hope, and cripple joy — they only carry bad news, never good news. Gifts shrivel under their critical gaze, achievements dwindle, confidence vanishes, morale sags, and fear replaces courage. Nothing is ever good enough. They say such things as, "You'll never learn. Why don't you give up? You're too clumsy. You have no talent." They greet a beautiful creative story by a child with complaints about the child's handwriting or spelling.

When we are with such people, we feel inadequate to face life. They make us feel less, in some real way, than we thought we were.

But then there are those splendid, magnificent, unforgettable people who invite us to life — who turn water into wine. With them, we are encouraged to grow and we are renewed. They give us a wave of energy to live on and urge us to develop all that we are or can be. They call out the best in us, and we are glad to be in their presence or have them around. We call them the “life of the party.”

Each one of us has the potential to be that kind of person. Our Christian faith calls us to be that. That’s what the early followers of Jesus remembered about being in his presence. He added something positive and life-affirming.

Secondly, the early church remembered this story of the water made into wine at a wedding reception because it reminded them that God is with us in the everyday events of life, in our times of sorrow and in our celebrations.
Jesus, God’s love fully focused in a human being, was not above such events or apart from them, but rather blessed such things as marriage celebrations with his presence, especially when invited.

The people who invited Jesus and his disciples to the party had no fear that they would be self-righteous, dismal religious people who would put a damper on the celebration.

The story reminds us that God is intimately involved in human happiness and in those loving relationships such as marriage. This is a fact that some people of faith seem to forget. They try to make religion into an austere affair, always serious and intense. They identify sin with having fun or enjoying oneself.

I heard a person who was being interviewed on the radio the other day say that he thought of religion as putting a damper on having fun. He said that his religious faith had not made him stop sinning, but that it had cut down on the enjoyment that went with it.

On a deeper level, this story of Jesus being present at a wedding celebration and turning water into wine speaks to us of the importance of festivity and celebration in our lives.

We human beings are, by our nature, creatures who not only work and think but who sing, dance, laugh, pray, tell stories, and celebrate. When festivity and joy disappear from one’s life or from culture, then something very holy is endangered.

This story was remembered by the early church because it reminded them that festivity is absolutely vital to human life and to our Christian faith. The festival, the special time when ordinary chores are set aside while people celebrate some event, affirms the sheer goodness of God’s creation. Festivity is a way of saying “yes” to life. It includes joy at the deepest level.

In fact, I believe that genuine laughter is a form of prayer. The laughter I’m speaking of is not the laughter of the practical joke or laughing at someone, but the smiles and laughter that come from the joy of being together.

I still remember the laughter that took place among my brothers and sisters and our families while we were together for my mother’s funeral many years ago. It was not only an important part of the healing of our grief but also a form of prayer.

It's easy to get preoccupied with producing and managing so that we lose touch with that part of ourselves that has to do with fun, festivity, and laughter. We forget that God's love, which was focused in Jesus, is the wine of life as well as the bread of life.

Thirdly, the story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding celebration speaks to us on yet another level. At the end of the story, the writer of the Gospel of John adds the statement, "This is the first of the signs Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, which manifested his glory." The writer is interested in more than the act of turning water into wine. Stories such as this one always point to something beyond themselves. Note that Jesus does not ask that ordinary water jugs be filled with water, but jugs that were usually used for the water needed for the Jewish ritual of purification.

The story is telling us that God's love, as demonstrated in Jesus, supersedes the old way, the old religion. It fills up the empty jugs and changes them into something new — what was water now becomes wine, and it is wine that is better than any heretofore served. The emptiness in our lives is filled with more than we asked for.

Remember in the story when the water, now made wine, is brought to the person in charge of the wedding reception, he does not know its source. When he tastes it, he declares, "This new wine is much better than that which was previously served." Usually, the good wine is served first, and when people have had plenty to drink, the wine of lesser quality is served.

The early church was remembering that God does not serve us as we usually serve others. God has saved the good wine until last, and when it is served, it is much better than any wine previously served.

And more than that, there is an overflowing abundance of this good wine that God provides. There is enough of God's love for all of creation and everyone in it, and even more.

So this little story from the Gospel of John is saying — invite God's love into your life, into your total life, into your joys as well as your sorrows and despairs. God's love will be at home with you. And wherever that love enters, when it's invited, it brings a new richness, a new joy.

When you invite the love of God into your life, there are always unanticipated surprises. The bride and groom did not invite Jesus to the wedding celebration because they were worried about running short of wine and thought this would be an easy and inexpensive way to get more. No, they invited him because they wanted Jesus there for himself. The water turned into wine was an unexpected bonus.

So today, lift up your heads and rejoice, for water is turned into wine, winter becomes spring, and death is turned into life. It is God's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. Amen.