

A Miracle of Abundant Joy
Miracles Series: Stories of God's Generosity
Sermon on John 1:19-2:11 (8/22 & 8/23/15)
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This summer, I was blessed to have been able to attend two weddings as a guest – one was a wedding in Valley City for a couple of young colleagues and the other was a cousin's wedding just last weekend in Georgia.

By the end of this summer, I will have officiated an average of one wedding each month, there are a couple *more* McCabe weddings on the books for this fall, and my sister and brother-in-law celebrated their first wedding anniversary last weekend – which, of course, brought to mind all of the details of their wedding day last August 16th.

So, weddings have just kind of been on my mind these days!

As a pastor, there are seasons of life and ministry that seem to center around weddings more than other seasons. Right now, I'm in the midst of a “wedding-type” season. And weddings are fascinating, complex events, aren't they? When you're simply a guest, you don't always know about everything that's happening behind the scenes of a wedding.

You don't know the agony of choosing the guest list – you're just grateful (or not!) that you were on it. You don't always know what's happening between the family members or how the in-laws are managing to get along.

You don't know what kind of drama may have gone on while determining who would serve as part of the wedding party. And, though you can perhaps imagine this part, you don't know how many fights have been had over the expenses surrounding the blessed event.

When you're a wedding guest, you hope to show up and have a good time celebrating the love between the bride and the groom. The bride and the groom – along with their families – typically hope for the same thing: that they have a great day celebrating love and life.

But sometimes things don't go quite as planned. Well, actually, in every wedding, something doesn't go quite as planned...sometimes it's even something of disastrous proportions. And, during the wedding in today's reading from John chapters one and two, the plan fell apart and something of disastrous proportions occurred.

But we'll get back to that in a few minutes.

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Early this summer here at McCabe United Methodist Church, we began a year-long sermon- and worship-related focus on *generosity*.

To kick-off this focus on generosity, we explored many of Jesus' parables – many of the stories he told. See, at their core, many of Jesus' parables, are about *generosity*: God's generosity toward us...and how we are called to be generous toward others.

And, of course, generosity is a diverse thing because it has to do with *all* of life – our thoughts and words, as well as our time, energy, and money.

So we started our year-long, generosity focus with a series on stories *about* God's generosity. Now, we are in the midst of a four-week series on stories *of* God's generosity – stories where God's generosity is made real through miraculous events.

Though there are miraculous events throughout the Bible, in this *miracles* series, we're looking specifically at miracles in the Gospel of John.

Two weeks ago, we began this focus on miracles with the story of Jesus miraculously feeding thousands of people with barely any food. Two weeks ago our reading also included the story of Jesus miraculously walking on water in the midst of a great windstorm. These were miracles of God's provision and calming presence – reminders that God *will* provide what we need and that God *will* be present with us in the midst of life's storms.

Last week, we continued with a story of God's miraculous *healing* through Jesus. Healing is complicated and we don't always experience it the way we want to or the way we pray for...but God *does* heal. And it's always a miracle when it happens.

Through this series, I hope we'll all become ever more watchful for God's miraculous generosity. Because God's miraculous generosity is on display *all* the time, all around us...but, so often, life gets crowded and we miss it.

People disappoint us or we disappoint others...things just don't go the way we hope they will and we struggle to experience – or to even *recognize* – God's generosity. Even more specific to today's particular miracle, when we are struggling in this life, or when things don't go as planned, *joy* can seem like a far away reality.

But if today's story from early in the Gospel of John has any good news for us, that good news is that God is always working to bring us miracles of abundant joy. // //
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So...today's reading from the Gospel of John is from *early* in the Gospel, but it is not the *very* beginning. We're actually going to hear the *very* beginning of John next week.

What we read about in the very beginning of John is the final miracle we'll explore in this *miracles* series. And the *very* beginning of John's Gospel is not much of a story – it's more of a poem. But, again, we'll get to that next week.

Today's reading is actually toward the beginning of the *narrative* of John's Gospel – toward the beginning of John's *story* about Jesus' life, his ministry, his death, and his resurrection.

The narrative of John's Gospel begins when we meet John the Baptizer, or, as he is more commonly known, John the Baptist. The local religious leaders knew of John the Baptist: they knew of his preaching and they knew he had developed a bit of a following. So the religious leaders were curious about him.

Perhaps they wanted to know if he was some kind of threat to their leadership... perhaps they were simply curious.

As today's reading indicates, when the religious leaders asked John the Baptist who he was, John was clear: "I am not the Messiah. I'm not Elijah. I'm not the great Prophet." "Who *are* you, then?" the religious leaders asked John.

As the reading goes today, John finally answered in the affirmative: "I am only someone shouting in the desert, 'Get the road ready for the Lord!'" And then came the question about baptism: "If you aren't the Messiah or Elijah or the great Prophet, why are you baptizing people?"

And then John explained how he simply baptized with *water*...but that someone far greater than he would be coming – someone who would use more than *water* to bring blessing into the world.

Of course, water is good and necessary and important...but I think it means something that John pointed out how the one who was coming would use *more* than water to do his holy work. Keep that in mind as we move forward in today's story.

When Jesus then arrived on the scene, John introduced him to his own disciples and those disciples began following Jesus. They called Jesus "Rabbi," or teacher, and they asked Jesus where he lived. When Jesus responded with, "Come and see," it was not simply an invitation to check out his digs: it was an invitation to listen to him...to sit at his feet as students.

By the end of John chapter *one*, Jesus had found himself a following of at least Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathaneal. Jesus had said to them, "Come and see what I'm all about" and they had responded. And it wasn't long before those new disciples got to see a bit of what Jesus was about...because, a few days later, they all went to a wedding.

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So. Let's get back to thinking about weddings. And, again, let me just acknowledge that weddings are complex. *Marriage* is complex.

There is both great joy and great sadness when it comes to such matters. We are imperfect people with varying life experience in these arenas, so we often have mixed feelings about weddings and about marriage.

Marriage carries with it a lot of negative emotional baggage for some of us and it's worth acknowledging that baggage here in the church: some church folks have longed to get married but have yet to meet The One and others thought they had found The One, only to have things fall apart some time later.

When we are face-to-face with a Scripture reading about a wedding, it's hard not to think about marriage and all its baggage. But, today's story really is far more about *weddings* than it is about *marriage* – to whatever extent we can ever separate the two.

So, if you are someone who carries with you a lot of negative emotional baggage around *marriage*, I'm going to kindly ask you to set it aside for a few minutes.

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Most of us have been to weddings before – many of you have gotten married so you know what it's like to make sure all the details are in order and that nothing goes too terribly wrong on the big day.

You want the ceremony to be lovely and you want the reception to be fun and celebratory. Your guests have made a point to come to your wedding and the reception is the “thank you gift” the bridal family gives to the guests. You want it be a good gift, right?

Well, regardless of how you all may feel about the presence of alcohol and about drunkenness at wedding receptions, in John 2 we learn that both alcohol *and* drunkenness were pretty important at the wedding receptions around Jesus' time.

In the story about the wedding at Cana in Galilee, all the folks present would have been Jewish and wine is featured prominently in many traditional Jewish religious events – including weddings.

When you are *hosting* such an event, it is your job to provide adequate supplies for the celebration. But, at this particular wedding reception, heaven forbid, the wine *ran out*. What in the world do you do?

People would have been expecting a good time that would last well into the night – and perhaps for several more days beyond – but the hosts hadn't planned well

enough...or maybe they didn't have a lot of money...who knows. Whatever the reason, the wine ran out...and that was a major problem.

Well, it *would have been* a major problem – but, as we are aware, *Jesus* happened to be a guest at this particular wedding celebration. As did Jesus' mother. So...knowing Jesus could easily fix this unfortunate problem and help the wedding hosts save some face, Jesus' mother approached him and told him there was no more wine.

At first Jesus didn't seem to care all that much...but then he noticed six empty water jars nearby – each jar able to hold between 20 and 30 gallons of liquid. So Jesus asked the servants to fill the empty jars with water...and then, mysteriously – *miraculously* – Jesus changed the water into wine. And not just *any* wine: really, really, really *good* wine.

I love what the head servant said to the groom when he tasted the water-turned-to-wine: “The best wine is always served first. Then after the guests have had plenty, the other wine is served. But you have saved the best until last!”

It's worth noting that other translations of the Bible put this a bit more bluntly: “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become *drunk*.” Read: “You serve the good wine first when people are actually paying attention to how it tastes...and then you pull out the bottom-shelf swill when taste no longer matters.”

At any rate, Jesus performed his first public miracle in John's Gospel when he turned the water into wine...and, when he did, the guests of that wedding continued their celebration with upwards of 180 gallons of the best wine this world could ever offer.
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Now, the point of this story is not that every wedding should have 180 gallons of amazing wine...and the point of this story is certainly not that all good wedding receptions should end with the guests having had way too much to drink. Of course that is not what John is saying.

What John *is* saying is that this story reveals something important about who Jesus is...and, according to the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee, Jesus is about providing what's needed and transforming something ordinary into something *extraordinary*: simple water into amazing wine.

Not only that, but Jesus will do this with abundance...he will transform with extravagance.
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John the Baptist baptized with simple water, but he said someone was coming who would do far greater things than he was doing. //

When Jesus' first disciples asked him what he was all about, Jesus said, "Come and see." This miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee – this miracle of turning simple water into abundant, delicious wine – was the first thing they saw. And what an amazing sight to behold!

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Weddings are supposed to be about joy – *abundant* joy. When something went desperately wrong at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, Jesus graced it with a joyful miracle.

Well, friends, Jesus also graces *us* with miracles of joy.

In laughter between friends and loved ones. In experiencing forgiveness after a mess. In the relief that comes when a tough situation begins to turn around. In times of rest in the midst of life's busy seasons. Joy comes to us in so many, varied ways.

When we are struggling in this life – and when things just absolutely don't go as planned – then, more than ever, experiencing *joy* is an amazing miracle. It's also a gift from God.

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You know, when you think about it, God doesn't usually make miracles out of things that are already abundant and extravagant...why bother with those things? God usually makes miracles by using something simple to bring us exactly the kind of joy we need.

We may not get top-shelf wine out of our water faucets, but God *will* find a way to bring abundant, extraordinary joy out of the ordinary stuff of life.

That is the good news of today's reading. And thank God for it. Amen.