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*Third-Day Miracles*  
John 2:1-11

Someone has said, “Most weddings are accidents waiting to happen.” We’ve all witnessed our share of them resulting from the mishaps of ministers, musicians, the wedding party, and unexpected guests. I’ve seen groomsmen pass out from locking their knees, organists have to extend the prelude another thirty minutes due to a bride being late, the loving campus dog wander down the aisle in the middle of a ceremony at an Episcopal conference center, and a soloist, singing from memory, get hung in a loop and the accompanist frantically improvise to avoid a total disaster.

During my first year of ministry, the very first wedding ceremony I officiated was for a twin and her fiancé in the bride’s large home setting. I moved through most of the ceremony with confidence. Coming to the vows, I asked the groom to repeat after me: “I, Steve, take you, Lisa...” to which he responded, “I, Steve, take you, Pam...” Pam was the bride. Lisa, whom I had referred to throughout the ceremony, was the twin sister serving as her Maid of Honor and standing beside her!

For first century Jewish weddings, the bride and groom celebrated the wedding not with a honeymoon, but with a seven-day feast at the home of the groom. This wedding that Jesus, his mother, and several of his disciples attended was in trouble because this host had run out of wine.

This wedding is important in John’s version of the gospel because it is the first of seven signs or miracles of Jesus. Cana, an obscure village north of Nazareth, provides bookends for five of these important events in chapters 2 through 4. In these three chapters, Jesus turns water into wine, explains that his body is the new temple, challenges Nicodemus to be born from above, offers living water to an unnamed woman at a well, and returns to Cana to give life to the son of a royal official. In the five events, the symbols of water, temple, wind, birth, and old wells are given new meaning through Jesus’ life-giving powers.

In today's text, the symbols of the wedding reveal that the people's spiritual dimension lacks hospitality and vigor. The six ritual pots of water, used for symbolic cleansing, have lost their true value. From these large, clay water jars come the finest of wine.

Being prompted by his mother to *do something*, Jesus performs his first miracle. The passage *does* leave the door open for Jewish-mother stories!

A young Jewish man excitedly tells his mother he's fallen in love and going to get married. He says, "Just for fun, Ma, I'm going to bring over three women and you try and guess which one I'm going to marry." The mother agrees.

The next day, he brings three beautiful women into the house and seats them on the couch and they chat for a while. The son then says, "Okay, Ma. Guess which one I'm going to marry." She immediately replies, "The red-head in the middle."

"That's amazing, Ma. You're right. How did you know?"

"I don't like her, that's how."

Three Jewish mothers are sitting on a bench in City Center talking about (what else?) how much their sons love them.

Sadie says, "You know the Chagall painting hanging in my living room? My son, Arnold, bought that for me for my 75th birthday. What a good boy he is and how much he loves his mother."

Minnie says, "You call that love? You know the Mercedes I just got for Mother's Day? That's from my son Bernie. What a doll."

Shirley says "That's nothing. You know my son Stanley? He's in therapy with a psychoanalyst on Harley Street. Five sessions a week. And what does he talk about? Me."

Let me make several worthy observations about this first miracle in John. First, the setting was that of a celebration. Jesus was often a guest at banquets and feasts. His calling in life was to lead people to life "in all of its fullness." His opening sermon and teachings in the fifth chapter of Matthew, known as the Beatitudes, begin each phrase with "Blessed or happy are the poor in spirit...happy are those who mourn...happy are the meek...happy are the pure in heart...."

Celebrations have a way of transforming people. The Greeks understood the high importance of it in their culture of recreation, celebration, and feasts. Out of their culture have come the Olympic Games which draw the world together, despite our many differences.

A classic movie, based on an Isak Dinesen story is *Babette's Feast*. The setting of the story is that of a Danish peninsula inhabited by puritanical Lutherans. The movie depicts a morbid tone of unhappiness and broken relationships. Living with the community for fourteen years is an adult female political refugee from Paris who serves as a housekeeper for older twin sisters whose pastor-father had founded the community. The only link with her former life is a lottery ticket that a friend in Paris renews for her every year. One day she wins the lottery of 10,000 francs that would allow her to return to her former home in adequate style. However, she uses her large winnings to prepare a "feast" on the deceased pastor's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday for the religious community who took her in. Unknown to this judgmental Christian community, Babette was a reknown chef in Paris and her exquisite meal becomes a gift of thanksgiving. Her "feast" reflects the true nature of love and grace. An old friend of the community, "the general," is present and recognizes the culinary artistry of Babette. He offers a toast he once heard the old pastor give which quotes part of the 85<sup>th</sup> Psalm: "Mercy and truth, my friends, are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." Babette's feast breaks down their distrust and the superstitions among them. Physically and spiritually, they are elevated. Old wrongs are forgotten and ancient loves are rekindled.

The story is a powerful statement of the true experience of the living Christ amid empty vessels of religion. Jesus first miracle in the gospel of John was turning water into wine—resurrecting life from the empty forms of rituals.

A second observation is that this first sign of Jesus as Israel's long-awaited Messiah was one of renewed hospitality. I am not sure but what the most powerful tool of evangelism for the church today is sincere hospitality. We do well to remind ourselves daily of the words attributed to Jesus around the Last Supper: "By this will all people know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another."

On the first Friday and Saturday of this past December, I served on the consulting team with a church consultant from California that five presbyteries (including our own and Greater Atlanta) are using to bring healthiness to presbyteries and churches in decline. The weekend focus was a severely declining church in Virginia Beach and four Hampton Roads pastors were on his consulting team, though primarily we were observing the expert. Paul Borden, the consultant, interviewed church leaders asking them questions like, “What do you like best about your church?” The common answer for everyone to this question was, “the people—their friendly.” Borden said later to the team that he had never seen a church that didn’t think they were the friendliest church in town. There’s a difference in friendly and offering friendship. Members look at the issue of friendliness from the inside out. Guests to a church view the issue of friendliness from the outside in. Some studies have found a direct correlation between friendliness and potential growth. The friendlier...the greater its potential for growth. The less friendly...the lower its potential.

As you enter the narthex and sanctuary and leave this place after worship, make a practice of looking for people who may be new, or people whose name you do not know. Smile, introduce yourself, and ask them if this is their first time at Hilton. Without making them uncomfortable, learn their names and other information that might be special to them. Introduce them to some of your friends. Gary McIntosh, another church consultant says that most first-time guest make a decision to come back or not in the first 30-seconds after entering the building. It’s no accident that the Lily Foundation study of fifty healthy and vital congregations in mainline denominations found that hospitality was the number one characteristic among healthy and growing churches.

What people need in our world is not “friendly,” but friendship.

The last observation I want to make from today’s text is that this is one of those resurrection miracles. At the worst possible moment, the most unexpected blessing happens. This poetic wedding miracle begins with the words: “On the third day....” Obviously, the writer of this gospel intends to connect the story to the other “on the third day” event to occur near the end of his gospel.

This miracle of changing water into wine is loaded with richness. The pattern of such first century wedding feasts was for the host to serve their finest

wine first. As the celebration moved along, the poorest wines were served last. In *this* story, the groom's family was on the verge of being embarrassed as the wine had run out. Taking a cue from his mother in this story loaded with symbolism, Jesus told the servants of the house to fill six empty clay vessels (used for ritual religious cleansing)...fill the jars full of water, then draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.

This "third day miracle" is a resurrection story. It has reflections of a hungry multitude out in the middle of nowhere being fed. It speaks of well-water capable of quenching one's thirst now in such a way that she will never be thirsty again. It shadows the event of an adulterous woman about to be stoned, which is used to dramatize that none of us are perfect and we all have a chance to start over in the eyes of God. It begins the powerful theme proclaimed before the raising of Lazarus, "I am the resurrection and the life." In Christ, the worst of times can become the best of times.

*...Then the master of the house called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."*

*This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.*

So they did...and so must we. AMEN.

### **John 2:1-11**

1On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." 4And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come" 5His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." 6Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. 7Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. 8He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. 9When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom 10and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." 11Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

### **1 Corinthians 12:12-31a**

12For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

14Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31But strive for the greater gifts.