

Jesus Is at Your Party

When Jenny and I moved out here, we planned to come a week early, before we were scheduled to start work. It wasn't to have time to settle in, though that was a nice benefit. It was because one of our best friends from seminary, a priest named Mike Angell, was getting married in St. Louis, and moving out here gave us the perfect opportunity to go and celebrate with him in person. It worked out well for us because he was getting married on Pentecost Sunday, which would have been hard to take off if we had been working. The wedding was in the cathedral in St. Louis because Mike's partner was a longtime member there. The ceremony took place during the main 10 o'clock morning service- procession, vows, everything, worked right into the liturgy, and then they helped serve communion to everyone at the end. It was interesting because I have been to a lot of weddings, but never one like that in the middle of a normally scheduled service.

But what was even more interesting to me was the reception afterwards. It wasn't in some parish hall or similar venue. It took place in the nave and sanctuary of this huge, beautiful old gothic cathedral. The very space we worshipped in was literally transformed into the reception space - tables were set up right down in the normal seating area, food was served from off to the side near where the little chapel was, and the altar had been pushed back and in its central place a dance floor was constructed. And we had our celebration right there in the house of celebration. We gave thanks for God's blessing this union in the very same space we had just celebrated the blessing of communion for all. I asked the dean of the cathedral about it, and he told me that when they redesigned the space they made sure everything was movable so that they could do just this sort of event. It was important to them, he said, that people be reminded that God's house was the birthplace of all celebration, all goodness. This was the place to recognize joy.

So often I think we fall into the trap of seeing weddings as spiritual things, things God really cares about, but receptions as human endeavors - parties that have nothing to do with God. We think about that breakdown in so many aspects of life - there are the spiritual things that are God's realm of influence and concern, and then everything else, that God might care about in some abstract way, but isn't intimately involved in, like our social life, our jobs, our hobbies and pastimes.

Author James McBride Dabbs writes about how he remembers religion growing up in rural South Carolina. In his book, *The Road Home*, he captures just this idea. He writes, "Religion was a day and a place: religion was Sunday and the church: almost everything else was life. Religion was a curious, quiet, and inconsequential moment in the vital existence of a country boy. It came around every week, but it didn't seem to have much to do with the rest of life, that is, with life."

Today's gospel passage is meant to make us understand that that notion is not true. God is concerned with and involved in all things - not just what we think of as spiritual things. Jesus didn't just come to the wedding, he stayed for the party. The familiar story here known as the wedding of Cana, may be more appropriately called the wedding reception in Cana, since that is the only part of the story that we actually get. Jesus had already gathered his disciples and

presumably started his important ministry here on earth. But he took time out to attend this wedding and the reception that followed - even though we don't get any suggestion as to whose wedding this was or why they were important to Jesus. In their culture, the reception was really a seven day event at the home of the groom's parents, so Jesus was devoting some serious time to this. Since the event lasted so long, running out of wine was not as extraordinary as it sounds. But it was potentially embarrassing for the family. That's the concern that Mary brings to Jesus.

Now I will admit, I don't know how to read how to read Jesus' response in any way that doesn't sound offensive: 'Woman, what concern is that to you and me?' Maybe it was a test to see if the others understood what he was all about and would push back. Maybe he really thought that it wasn't time to start the miracle-working yet, in this way. And maybe in response to that Mary gave him that wilting look that a mother gives a child sometimes right before they do exactly what they know their supposed to. Maybe Jesus was having a very human moment of wanting a little time off, to just relax and celebrate with his friends. But the lesson is that for the messiah there isn't an off time, because God is redeeming all aspects of human life; God's presence and blessing must be proclaimed in every facet of existence - every high, every low, every blessing, every need. This religion would not be held to a time and space, to certain rituals and ceremonies. God had invaded the world at the incarnation of Christ- showing up at peoples' work, attending their events, touching them in their illness, holding their kids, weeping at their deaths, eating in their homes - nothing was off limits or outside the bounds. God was demonstrating real care and concern for all of it. The result of the story here is that it all does matter to Jesus - even the concern of running out of wine at the party and cutting the celebration short, and that is what makes this religion matter.

And Jesus does more than Mary or anyone else would have expected or dared dream. Those six containers of water would have been the equivalent of a hundred and eighty gallons of wine. It was no small thing; it was the generous gift of an abundant blessing. But more importantly, those containers were meant to hold the water for ritual cleansing before meals- you know, that spiritual stuff that their religion told them had to take place. But Jesus used them to hold the wine for the reception - because it was all part of the religion he was bringing. There was no separation between the religious stuff and life. God was in all of it, and all of it was in the realm of God's concern.

And this is where the gospel writer John starts his story of Jesus' ministry - not with calling disciples to do spiritual work, or preaching or arguing with Pharisees, or even some more spectacular sign like a healing, but with the miracle of more wine, with the sign of abundant joy, with God present at the party. Whose wedding it was made no difference to John. His point was that Jesus cared about these mundane earthly concerns in people's lives; if they matter to them, they matter to God. God is at your party. God is around your dinner table. God cares about your pastimes. It's not all about forgiving sins, or healing sickness. God is about making us whole, and whole people have well-rounded, fully integrated lives. Jesus is concerned with the totality of it. God is about helping us be redeemed to the lives that God intended for us, and those lives are joyous lives, intimately connected to God in every possible way.

The message of Cana is: 'Don't make your religion so holy that it sucks out the joy.' God came into the world to celebrate. That's the good news. It's not just that Jesus can do more than we can ask or imagine. It is that he cares more than we commonly imagine. The story shows us that God cares about all of it. Does it impact your life? Then God cares about it. Would it make

you live more fully into a reality of life abundant? Then it is something that concerns God. This is where the ministry of Jesus starts - in all the things that are important to you. And it continues on until it has seeped into and overflowed every aspect of your existence and you are fully and wholly with God. The promised life abundant simply starts with life, and it grows until God's presence is more abundant than you can hold.

God refuses to be contained in the proper place and time, to be controlled by ceremony and ritual alone, to be blocked out from all the day-to-day activities of life. God cares about you, about your whole life, and God is looking to show up at all times and fill every moment, every situation with God's grace and presence beyond our imagining. Let's celebrate that. Amen.