

# North Kildonan United Church

16<sup>th</sup> January 2022 ~Rev. Don Johnson

## “A Wedding in Cana”

*Isaiah 62: 1-5*

*Psalms 36: 5-10*

*John 2: 1-11*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

A month ago we were pleased to host a wedding ceremony, and the reception which followed, here at North Kildonan United Church. Although our sanctuary was decorated for Christmas, with garlands and poinsettias and two Christmas trees, the happy couple were able to add their personal touches, thus making our church home even more beautiful and welcoming. And if we overlooked the presence of masks, it was easy to believe that we were in normal pre-pandemic days, days without fear of contagion and risk, days of joy and gladness, days we eagerly look forward to enjoying once more.

It was a happy occasion, and we were very fortunate to have scheduled the event just before this recent variant turned everything upside down. In these days of limitations and restrictions and cancellations, it was so very good to be able to participate in a life-giving, life-affirming, delightful celebration, to be able to play our part in adding to this young couple's joy and hope for the future. It was a tangible reminder that in time we will once again be free to plan celebrations and gatherings without fear or worry. A reminder that what was once common and available will once again be possible for us. And we so need that reminder in days like this. So we hope the very best for this couple starting out their married life together, and we are glad that they chose our church home to be the place to celebrate this new beginning.

In John's gospel, the first sign or miracle that Jesus performed, the first public display of his power and identity, was at a wedding in Cana in Galilee. We are told that both Jesus and his mother were at the event, and Jesus's disciples were invited as well. It's interesting to note that John's gospel doesn't call her Mary, just the mother of Jesus. But we can call her Mary.

So the wedding is in full celebration, perhaps with more guests present than originally planned for. And no doubt this was a typical Jewish wedding for those days, a celebration that didn't end after a few hours but went on for days, possibly a week. To host such an event would be a costly affair, but to run out of wine would be terribly embarrassing, probably bringing the celebration to an abrupt conclusion.

Running out of wine is exactly what happened. Mary must have been close to the family of the married couple because she was aware of the wine shortage and felt the need to do something about it. Mary tells Jesus, and he says to his mother, in language

which seems to be a bit harsh: "*Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.*" I have a nephew who sometimes, in a bid to be funny, will call his mother "Woman". It is funny but also a bit unsettling when he does it. But that's an aside.

At first glance it seems like Jesus is refusing to help. But Mary instructs the servants to do whatever Jesus asks them to do, obviously hopeful that somehow Jesus might rescue the situation.

So Jesus tells the servants to fill six water-jars with water. Think of the amount of water used. Six jars, each holding between twenty to thirty gallons of water. This amounts to 120 to 180 gallons, not a mere four litre box of wine, but gallons upon gallons.

The chief steward tastes the liquid now transformed into wine and talks with the groom. He says: '*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.*' A total reversal of the common custom of the day.

Of course, the incredible amount and the high quality of the wine speak of the extravagant abundance of God, a sign of God's fulfillment of God's promise in Jesus Christ.

In the Feasting on the Word commentary for this Sunday, Robert Breakley writes:

"James McBride Dabbs, an author and Presbyterian elder, remembers religion as the opposite of life in rural South Carolina. '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.' The sign at Cana tells us that Jesus served a God who puts joy into life, who thinks it is worth a miracle to keep the party going as we celebrate people.

"God does not want our religion to be too holy to be happy in. Throughout his life and his ministry, Jesus of Nazareth celebrated people-people getting married, people being healed of disease and deformity, people enjoying meals together. He carried a spirit of celebration with him wherever he went as he proclaimed a God of mercy and peace and joy. This joyous feast at Cana is still a sign to the church that we are to rejoice in the people of God and to toast the world with the amazing good news of grace."

Jesus was, of course, steeped in Jewish teachings and practices. It is probably helpful for us to be aware of Jewish marriage customs as we hear of this wedding that Jesus and his mother Mary attended. Let me conclude this sermon as I share with you the perspective and wisdom of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on the subject of Jewish weddings.

He wrote in 2003, in an article entitled *Marriage is a metaphor for our relationship with God*, the following:

“In a few weeks’ time we will be celebrating our daughter’s wedding. It is hard to convey the depth of emotion I feel at a Jewish wedding. It is more than a ceremony sanctifying the commitment of bride and groom, because individuals are more than individuals. We are who we are because of our parents and the drama of which they and we are a part. A wedding in Judaism is a new chapter in the story of the Jewish people.

The “seven blessings”, said over the bride and groom, go back some two thousand years. In them we refer to the first couple, Adam and Eve, married by God himself with the sky as their bridal canopy. We recall a phrase, taken from Isaiah and the Book of Psalms, about a “barren woman” who, against expectation, has the joy of having children. That, for us, is the Jewish people as a whole, who have so often suffered and wondered whether they would survive, but now see in this couple, hope for the future.

We quote the glorious prophecy of Jeremiah who, seeing Jerusalem desolate and destroyed, prophesied that in the city: *“There will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness and the voices of bride and groom”*.

It is as if all the previous generations of Jews, scattered through space and time, were present to give their blessings to the couple and to witness the miracle of the West’s most ancient faith become young again in the love of two people for one another.

Jewish weddings are usually exuberant, noisy, joyous, energetic and over-the-top. Ancient customs that had all but disappeared one or two generations ago are making a comeback. Many brides now adopt the mystical ceremony of circling the groom seven times. Marriage contracts have become highly decorative, as they used to be in the Middle Ages (the *ketubah* or marriage contract dates back to the pre-Christian era and is one of the first statements of women’s rights in history).

At a Jewish wedding you see the true nature of Jewish spirituality — too serious to be wholly serious, too conscious of God’s blessings to do anything other than rejoice. Judaism is God’s invitation to celebrate life.

How devastating it is that marriage seems to have lost its power in society as a whole. A wedding ceremony is more than a formality and a piece of paper. The prophets saw marriage as the single most compelling metaphor for the relationship between God and us — because it involves commitment, a mutual pledge of openness and trust, a promise that neither will walk away in difficult times. From that covenant of loyalty and love, new life comes into the world.

Marriage is not just living together, a temporary partnership for mutually beneficial ends. Heaven help us if that is all we see in it. It is the point at which the “I” of self meets the “Thou” of another, transforming us into something larger, more spacious, more generous and tender than we could ever be on our own. In marriage at its best you see humanity at its best, and in a loving home you can almost touch the divine presence.

Jeremiah once said: *"I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown."* To take someone else's hand and begin a journey together into the undiscovered country called the future: that is marriage, love sanctified by the mutual gift of trust."

Amen.