

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
January 20, 2019, The 2nd Sunday of Epiphany
 Psalm 36:5-10, John 2:1-11
FILLED TO THE BRIM, AND OVERFLOWING

Through the years I have learned many things at the weddings at which I have officiated. They can be times of great joy, great stress, laughter, tears, and unexpected holy ground. When I was in seminary I read a story about a wedding and thought that some day I would like to use it in a sermon. Then I forgot about it. Until this week as I spent time with the Wedding at Cana. This story is told by the Rev. Robert Fulgham, whom you may remember for his book of 30 years ago: *Everything I Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. This story comes from his second book: *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*.

Fulgham says that "...most weddings are such comedies.

He continues: Not that they are intended as such. But since weddings are high state occasions involving amateurs under pressure, everything NEVER goes right. Weddings seem to be magnets for mishaps and for whatever craziness lurks in family closets.

He says: I will tell you the quintessential wedding tale. One of disaster. Surprisingly, it has a happy ending, though you may be in doubt, as I was, as the story unfolds.

The central figure in this drama was the mother of the bride (MOTB). Not the bride and groom or the minister. Mother. Usually a polite, reasonable, intelligent, and sane human being, Mother was mentally unhinged by the announcement of her daughter's betrothal. I don't mean she was unhappy, as is often the case. To the contrary. She was overcome with joy. And just about succeeded in overcoming everybody else with her joy before the dust settled.

Nobody knew it, but this lady had been waiting with a script for a production that would have met with Cecil B. DeMille's approval. A royal wedding fit for a princess bride. And since it was her money, it was hard to say No. The father of the bride began to pray for an elopement. His prayers were not to be answered.

She had seven months to work, and no detail was left to chance or human error. Everything that could be engraved was engraved. There were teas and showers and dinners. The bride and groom I met with only three times. The MOTB called me weekly, and was in my office as often as the cleaning lady. *(The caterer called me to ask if this was really a wedding, or an invasion he was involved in. "Invasion," I told him.)*

An eighteen piece brass and wind ensemble was engaged. *(The church organ simply would not do—too "churchy")*...Not only were the bridesmaids' outfits made to order, but the tuxedos for the groom and his men were bought, not rented, mind you.

Looking back, it seems now that the rehearsal and dinner on the evening before the great event were not unlike what took place in Napoleon's camp the night before Waterloo. Nothing had been left to chance. Nothing could prevent a victory on the coming day. Nobody would EVER forget this wedding. *(Just as nobody forgot Waterloo. For the same reason, as it turned out.)*

The juggernaut of fate rolled down the road, and the final hour came. Guests in formal attire packed the church. Enough candles were lit to bring daylight back to the evening. In the choir loft the orchestra gushed great music. And the mighty MOTB coasted down the aisle with the grandeur of an opera diva at a premier performance. Never did the mother of the bride take her seat with more satisfaction. She had done it. She glowed, beamed, smiled, and sighed.

The music softened, and nine—count them, nine--chiffon-draped bridesmaids lockstepped down the long aisle while the befrocked groom and his men marched stolidly into place.

Finally, oh so finally, the wedding march thundered from the orchestra. Here comes the bride...

Ah, the bride! She had been dressed for hours if not days. No adrenaline was left in her body. Left alone with her father in the reception hall of the church while the march of the maidens went on and on, she had walked along the tables laden with gourmet goodies and absentmindedly sampled first the pink and yellow and green mints. Then she picked through the silver bowls of mixed nuts and ate the pecans. Followed by a cheeseball or two, some black olives, a handful of glazed almonds, a little sausage with a frilly toothpick stuck in it, a couple of shrimps blanketed in bacon, and a cracker piled with liver pate. To wash this down—a glass of pink champagne. Her father gave it to her. To calm her nerves.

What you noticed as the bride stood in the doorway was not her dress, but her face. White. For what was coming down the aisle was a living grenade with the pin pulled.

The bride threw up.

Just as she walked by her mother.

And by 'threw up' I don't mean a polite little ladylike *urp* into her handkerchief. She puked. There's no nice word for it. I mean, she hosed the front of the chancel, hitting two bridesmaids, the groom, a ring bearer, and me.

I am quite sure of the details. We have it all on videotape. Three cameras' worth. The MOTB had thought of everything.

Having disgorged her horsed 'oeuvres, champagne, and the last of her dignity, the bride went limp in her father's arms, while her groom sat down on the floor where he had been standing, too stunned to function. And the mother of the bride fainted, slumping over in rag-doll disarray.

We had a fire drill then and there at the front of the church that only the Marx Brothers could have topped. Groomsmen rushed about heroically, mini-princess flower girls squalled, bridesmaids sobbed, and people with weak stomachs headed for the exits. All the while, unaware, the orchestra played on...

Only two people were seen smiling. One was the mother of the groom. The other was the father of the bride.

What did we do? Well, we went back to real life. Guests were invited to adjourn to the reception hall, though they did not eat or drink as much as they might have in different circumstances. The bride was consoled, cleaned up, fitted out with a bridesmaid's dress, and hugged and kissed a lot by the revived groom (*She'll always love him for that. When he said "for better or worse," he meant it.*) The cast was reassembled where we left off, a single flute played a quiet air, the words were spoken and the deed was done. Everybody cried, as people are supposed to do at weddings, mostly because the groom held the bride in his arms through the whole ceremony. And no groom ever kissed a bride more tenderly than he.

If one can hope for a wedding that it be memorable, then theirs was a raging success. NOBODY who was there will EVER forget it.

But that's not the end of the story. The best part is still to come. On the tenth anniversary of this disastrous affair, a party was held. Three TV sets were mustered, a feast was laid, and best friends invited. (*Remember, there were three video cameras at the scene of the accident, so all three films were shown at once.*) The event was hilarious, especially with the running commentary and the stop-action stuff that is a little gross when seen one frame at a time. The part that got cheers and toasts was when the camera focused on the grin on the face of the father of the bride as he contemplates his wife as she is being revived.

The reason I say this is the best part is not because of the party. But because of who organized it. Of course. The infamous MOTB. The mother of the bride is still at it, but she's a lot

loser these days. She not only forgave her husband and everybody else for their part in the debacle, she forgave herself. And nobody laughed harder at the film than she.

There's a word for what she has. Grace.

And that's why the same grinning man has been married to her for forty years. And why her daughter loves her still.

Fulghum, Robert, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*,
New York: Balantine Books, 1988, pp. 7-13.

Grace, the surprising presence of God in the midst of all that our lives hold! Even and especially those times that might take 10 years to finally be able to laugh about them.

A most memorable disaster of a wedding, caught by three different video cameras, became a most memorable wedding because of the love, and humor and acceptance of that family that Robert Fulghum knew.

Grace was also abounding at the wedding in Cana in Galilee that we read about in John's gospel.

Because wedding traditions are different in each time and place, what we may not understand 20 centuries after the wedding in Cana is that it would have been an equally memorable disaster that day if the wine had run out. Not because it would have stopped the party, but because it would have brought shame to the bride's family.

Weddings lasted two to three days, sometimes even up to a week. Families planned and saved for a long time to get ready for a wedding.

If something went wrong, that family would be talked about for years to come. Upholding family honor was a big part of the Middle Eastern culture of Jesus' day.

Running out of wine wouldn't have been captured on film, but it would have been remembered as if it had been.

The wine at the wedding wasn't about getting drunk, that wasn't what happened at weddings. The wine was part of the abundance of the joyous celebration. Weddings were a time of family gathered together and sharing joy.

Interpretation Bible Commentaries: Sloyan, Gerard, *John*,
Louisville: John Knox Press, 1988, p. 6

The wine was a sign of the generosity and welcome given by the father of the bride to his guests. Wine in the Old Testament is often used a sign of "blessings and goodness and joy."

Hamilton, Adam, *John—The Gospel of Light and Life*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, p.36

In the Sunday School class that meets in the Library we read a book together about the Gospel of John last year. The author, Adam Hamilton, says that "John's stories are not meant merely to tell (us) what Jesus did and said; they are intended to convey the deeper meaning of Jesus' life."

Hamilton, p.31

Just as Robert Fulghum's story about the MOTB was about so much more than a wedding gone wrong, the wedding in Cana was about so much more than a social embarrassment for the father of the bride.

When the wine ran out Jesus turned ordinary water into wine.

A lot of ordinary water!

This week I've been thinking about what it means that John makes sure that we know that Jesus told the servants to fill those six jars up to the brim.

The Bible says the jars could hold 20 to 30 gallons of water, so one minute there were 120 to 180 gallons of water. The next minute there were 120 to 180 gallons of wine, and not just any wine, but really good wine. Wine worthy of a celebration, wine worthy of great joy!

An excessive abundance of wine, and an excessive abundance of “blessings, of goodness, and of joy.”

What does it tell us about Jesus’s presence in our lives that Jesus filled those water jars up to the brim?

What does it tell us about Jesus’ love for us that he came to that family in Cana with blessings and goodness and joy, of the very best kind?

He didn’t just change a potential disaster, he multiplied the joy of that wedding celebration.

With whatever is going on in your life right now, in the difficult, the joyous, the devastating or disastrous, what does it mean that Jesus has an extravagant abundance of joy and blessings and goodness for you?:

Gallons and gallons of abundant joy,

Gallons and gallons of abundant love,

Extravagant amounts of exactly what we need, filled up to the brim, the very best kind.

Even in our lives when it feels like:

the bride is a living grenade with the pin pulled.

and the father of the bride grins down at the fainting MOTB,

and even when everyone is either crying, or screaming, or running for the doors,

and the tape keeps rolling,

Jesus enters our lives with extravagant grace, extravagant love, extravagant joy, the very best kind.

And that has the power to change everything doesn’t it?