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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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John 2:1-11

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As I read aloud my sermon text, please notice the priority that St. John gives to our Lord's miracle at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Compared to the other evangelists, St. John relates only a few of the miracles of Jesus, and each one is what St. John calls a "sign" – that is, they are not just wonderful events, which make things better here on earth, but also they are revelations about Jesus. They teach us important things about our Lord. Well, the first of these signs is this one about changing the water into fine wine:

¹¹This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him. (John 2:11, RSV)

Young people in our congregation will hardly understand what I am about to say, because technology moves along so very quickly. But here goes: When I was in seminary, people still wrote on typewriters. Some people wrote their seminary papers by hand and then typed them up afterwards. But many of us composed directly on the typewriter. That's how I did it, with my trusty Olympia typewriter.

That is also how Dr. Eric Gritsch wrote. He used a typewriter. Dr. Gritsch, of blessed memory now, was a famous Reformation scholar. He wrote many books on Luther and the Reformation times. One of the books he wrote during my years at the Gettysburg Seminary was a lovely book on Luther called Martin – God's Court Jester. Of course, I dashed to the bookstore and bought the book as soon as it was available, and I have admired it ever since.

Also, I was curious about the life of a writer, and so I asked Dr. Gritsch to describe for me his methods and disciplines of writing. He told me that he did not need much sleep, and so he usually worked on his book in the wee hours, usually from about 3 a.m. to 5 a.m. Then he would turn to his other academic responsibilities for the day, finishing up lectures, doing committee work and so.

He said that he wrote his book on his typewriter, as I wrote my papers, but he had come up with an innovation: he taped his pages together so that they formed a scroll. Then he would edit his work by cutting out passages and relocating them, by taping them elsewhere in his scroll – a kind of original "cut and paste." It was a slow process, compared to writing on a computer, but Dr. Gritsch did not mind. He told me that he had learned, as he put it, "to not write faster than I think."

Well, it occurs to me that if I had written St. John's Gospel, I probably would have cut and pasted the story of the wedding in Cana and put it elsewhere. That's because I would want to give eminence of place to what is probably my favorite

miracle story: the calming of the sea. For me, that story overflows with hope. When I think of all the storms of life through which our people go, it thrills me to contemplate that Jesus can and will calm them all. What can more majestic than Jesus addressing the wind and the waves, “Peace, be still” (Mark 4:39)? Wind and waves have swamped many a ship and crushed many a rocky seashore, but when Jesus hushes them, they leap to obey like good children. I love that story, and I would have placed it first in the story of Jesus.

But St. John begins with the story of the wedding in Cana, and emphasizes that this is the first of our Lord’s signs. And, of course, there is wisdom in this. The Holy Spirit certainly knew what he was doing when he inspired John to begin with this story, a story of joy – a story of joy increased and magnified by our Lord Jesus. Let us try to reckon with this fact – the fact that this story of happiness is first in St. John’s Gospel.

After all, should it not be so? as the Bible tells the story of our world? For the story begins in happiness and ends that way. The story begins in the good garden of Eden and ends in the beautiful new Jerusalem with its streets of pure gold, its gates of pearl (Rev. 21:21), its river of life clear as crystal (Rev. 22:1), and God wiping away the tears from every eye (Rev. 21:4).

One of Martin Luther’s last works was his eight-volume commentary on Genesis. It is quite something – thrilling, really – to imagine life in the garden before sin came into the picture and spoiled things. Luther talks about the strength and powers of the bodies of Adam and Eve – the way they could see better than we do and hear better. He talks about the joy of sex and the bearing of children back before there was pain. He helps us to imagine the friendship between Adam and Eve and the animals, how you could walk right up to a grizzly bear and fear it as little as you would fear a lamb. And best of all, imagine those evening conversations when God would come down into the garden and walk and talk with Adam and Eve. What sublime conversations they must have had! Anything in the world they wanted to discuss, they could discuss with the Maker of all things.

And the story ends with joy too. I am delighted by the images of the streets of gold and gates of pearl, but even more, I am charmed simply by the thought of humanity being back on track, no longer beset by sin or crime or death or sickness. Give us a chance! Just give humanity a chance to live, without fear of hunger or thirst, meanness or crime or death. Just gives us a real chance to be good people, and it is fun to imagine all the great things we could build and accomplish. Well, the Bible speaks of the end of things that way. It speaks of a world in which sin, death, and the devil are gone – expelled entirely. Then we are going to be a happy folk.

So, by placing the story of the wedding in Cana first, it is as if St. John is saying, “Let’s get first things first. Our God loves us! That must mean joy for us in the end!” So, St. John begins the story of Jesus with a celebration.

Later in his gospel, St. John will nail down this theme about joy by speaking of the purpose for which Jesus came into this world in the first place. It is a text I have lifted up before, because it seems so very important to me. In John 10, the

Good Shepherd chapter, Jesus distinguishes himself from those who would harm the flock by saying that his will for the flock is only good. He wants his sheep to flourish:

The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. (John 10:10, KJV)

Jesus then immediately goes ahead to speak of his willingness to die in order that that might be possible for us:

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. (John 10:11, KJV)

Our faith rightfully speaks of the Cross – of the death of Jesus on the cross and of our duty to take up our own cross and follow him. And St. John surely knows about the cross of Christ. In fact, the Good Friday passion reading is always from St. John. Nonetheless, the evangelist does not want us to lose sight of the priority of joy in the Christian life. The Christian faith is not a downhearted faith. It somehow misrepresents our faith to be dour and mournful, to be humorless and to have no sparkle in our eye or spring in our step — at least from time to time. If Christians can't kiss under the mistletoe, raise a cheer at a football game, and enjoy rock and roll, what good are we? I mean, what good are we at witnessing to the idea that Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly!

And I do believe that many a white-haired Christian can say that the way of the cross and the virtues and disciplines appropriate to those who bear the name of Christ have not made for a depletion of life, but for a better life. They do not regret a thing about following Jesus except, perhaps, that they did not follow with even more earnestness.

Let me end this little sermon by noting that this, the first of our Lord's miracles, did not take place in a church or in a theology lecture, but in a home. We should always seek that this will be so: that as it was in the first of our Lord's miracles, so it will be so in our homes too: that Jesus will be present there.

Earlier this past week there was a gathering of young people over at the parsonage. When our guests arrived, they might have noticed on the kitchen wall an old-fashioned, sentimental picture of a cottage. The picture is yellowed with age and has a simple wooden frame my mother painted rose color. Surrounding the painting of the cottage is one of those pious sayings so much favored by an earlier generation -- the generation of my parents. The saying goes like this:

Christ is the Head of this House.
The unseen Host at every meal.
The silent Listener to every conversation.

With these words, my parents took their stand. And all these years later, I still give my testimony about my childhood home: it was a happy home. Having Jesus there made it a good place.

So St. John starts his story of Jesus by speaking of a celebration and of a magnificent supply of good wine from the good hands of our Lord Jesus. This the evangelist would have us keep in mind: that Jesus means for us to have a good and happy life in him.

So, if you are enjoying a good season of life nowadays, like, say, Missy and Joe Howell are so very joyful at the birth of little Axel, well, if life is being good to you these days, then know that that is how things should be! It is the will of our Maker for you. And if the days are not quite so good yet, then do not being overly discouraged by that. You are meant for better days. In fact, you can claim the promises of Psalm 128 for yourself:

¹Blessed is every one that feareth the LORD; that walketh in his ways.

²For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee. (Psalm 128:1-2, KJV)

Happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.