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Congregational Church of La Jolla
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A Party Unlike Any You've Ever Been Invited To

Let us pray:

Gracious God: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your sight. Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Jesus' first recorded miracle. Jesus the party guest. A wedding in Cana. Water turned into wine. There's a part in here that is a bit surprising but I like it. Jesus' mother comes to him and says and I like to imagine that she was kinda frazzled because she must have been a bit type A and she says, "They've run out of wine." And Jesus looks at her and says very understandably, "Uh, what does this have to do with me?" After all, he's just a guest. Which I like to think sort of normalizes their relationship a little bit—Jesus is like 30 years old at this point and his mother comes to him and tells him the wine (at some other people's wedding) has dried up and he's like "so what." What do you want me to do about it. But she must have known something because her response to this was to tell the waiters and waitresses working the wedding that they are to do whatever Jesus told them to do.

But let's put this in context. The wedding that Jesus is at is not of some celebrity couple. This is the wedding of a poor impoverished peasant couple from a poor village call Cana. Had Jesus not been there to save the day with the wine this marriage would have started very badly. Because in this culture it was shameful to invite people to a wedding and then to not provide them with enough food wine and it was even worse to run out mid way through. This is something that would have been talked about. It wasn't like there was forgiveness or grace for theses sorts of things. Marriages were important, weddings were a big deal. Transforming the water into abundant wine was not just something Jesus did to help keep the party going on into the night. Because he could have shown up at any party offering wine. Instead he chose to go to the wedding of a poor couple where he would provide them with the finest. During the time of Jesus life people who would go to weddings and parties would be served the wine that corresponded with their social class. So if there were people from different social classes at the same party those who were on the top would be served the grand reserve and those on the bottom would have to stand in line for the wine mixed with vinegar and water. In doing what Jesus did he was essentially showing everyone that the wine he serves is for everyone. And not only is it the finest quality there is an abundance of it. We are told he filled six stone water jars. Scholars estimate that each one probably held around 27 gallons so we

are talking about 162 gallons in total of the finest wine to be served to those who were used being fed vinegar water by the wider world.

I wonder what it says about Jesus that his first act was at a party. That is first act was in community. That is first act was in providing people libations in the name of celebration. Jesus is here trying to reach the people where they are. He didn't show them the glory of God in the temple but rather out in the world, in the parties and festivals, in the personal homes and in the daily lives of the people. Jesus was performing acts of amazement and glory out in the world where he believed God dwelled. Not just inside the stuffy old temple with the priests.

Jesus is making a clear statement that God's world is for everyone. That the reign of God is one where everyone has enough and no one is deprived or made to feel less than or ridiculed for not being able to provide enough for their guests. Jesus demonstrates here that all he expects is that you show up to the party thirsty to experience the joy of life. This text is less about wine and more about the fact that when we feel like there is not enough, when we feel like there is scarcity, when we feel like we cannot offer enough, when we feel we don't deserve it, Jesus shows up and fills our vessels to the brim with the finest and most exquisite substances. Jesus and his disciples crashed a wedding party in the way that we must allow him to crash the party of our lives and fill us up with hope in our most desperate and difficult times.

One of the things that in churches like ours that I hear is people who have a little bit of discomfort with this whole business of miracles. And this comes up whenever we talk about these very explicit physical miracles of Jesus be it this one or loaves and fishes or healing Lazerus. There are some who don't quite know what to make of this. And to be honest, I was once one of these people. If there was something that I couldn't intellectually reconcile it bothered me. And I couldn't really immerse myself in the story like I wanted to. And what happened is that I simply sat with this. I just held onto it. I walked my faith journey with the eye and the suspicion of a skeptic and what really changed for me was that at a certain point I made peace with mystery. And I found that when I did that I was freed from needing to reconcile every question and every aspect of faith with an intellectual response. Mystery is really at the heart of Christianity. Mystery is an invitation to live inside the questions. And I've discovered that it has been for me, the most life giving, most faithful practice I have. I no longer feel the need to have the answer and instead let myself live with the questions and to live surrounded by the questions.

So to me it doesn't matter if I can't comprehend Jesus turning water to wine. What matters to me is that Jesus invites us into an abundance that is incomprehensible. I love that. I'm less concerned with the physical chemistry of how water becomes wine and I'm more concerned with what it says about Jesus that he showed up to a wedding of poor people to give them 162 gallons of the best wine. I'm more interested in what it says

about Jesus that the Gospel writers wanted to make sure that we knew he hung out on the wrong side of town instead of in the palaces and the temples where some might think he should be. And I am grateful to stand in a faith that lets me ask questions and lets me appreciate that the grace and joy of Jesus is beyond anything that I can imagine.

Last week I spent the week on Zoom with the 13 other clergy in my cohort of UCC pastors across the country who I have covenanted with to join on a 6 year journey together as we figure out how to be the best possible pastoral leaders we can be for our respective communities. We were supposed to be at a conference center in Phoenix but due to Covid we were instead on our laptops looking at each other in little Zoom boxes. I am grateful to be a part of this group because it lets me continue to live in the mystery. We spend our time learning leadership theory, church life cycles, best practices for helping congregations focus on their true mission, how to lead through change and yet we do this without knowledge of what God has in store for any of us. To do this work requires comfort with mystery. It requires us to have faith that what we are and what we do is eternal and true and while we don't know what the next expression of Christianity will look like yet that we are ready and willing to go where God commissions us to go.

Another project that I do is that I am part of a denominational program that pares me with an incarcerated person who is a progressive Christian and who I write to monthly. Most church programs within prisons are conservative and there isn't much representation of Progressive religion within that system and there are many questioning, spiritual, and progressive Christians who find themselves incarcerated and looking for something different. For the past year I have written to an incarcerated woman in Texas named Kwaneta and she's been in solitary since 2016. I got a letter from her this week and she told me what a difficult time the holidays are for incarcerated people. She decorated her cell with cutouts from magazines of holiday decorations and she made a Christmas trees using paper that she colored green and she assembled it on a toilet paper roll. Then she took photos of all her friends and family and she placed them on the floor and imagined eating holiday meals with them. She said to me, "everyone has different ways of coping with it but we are all happier after January 2 arrives. We breath a sense of relief." Just this year there were 4 suicides in her unit and 6 people were on suicide watch on the day she wrote me.

Kwaneta wonders why a 70 year old white man can bring his gun into a prison visitation to see his granddaughter, cause a scene, and the police will come and hold his gun for him while he does the visit and why her friends black brother is arrested for bringing an api-pen and a cellphone into a visitation? Kwaneta laments to me that her friend faces 5 to 99 years added to her sentence because she gave a black eye to a male guard who demanded to watch her shower. She wonders how it's fair that prison guards can come to work unvaccinated and give covid to inmates who have no agency or authority to resist... Kwaneta has had covid twice so far.

Yet she is sustained by the mystery. By the knowledge that God's justice prevails. That Jesus shows up to the party that he's least expected at. That if Jesus crashed the party of a poor couple in Cana that he can crash the party of our lives too... because he often shows up in the places where he's least expected, in the most unlikely of places, revealing himself to the most unlikely people.

The Jesus that I believe in is precisely the sort of Jesus our Gospel story tells us about. A Jesus who crashes the party and who shows up in Kwaneta's prison in Texas and pours out jars of the best wine, who invites us to be the guest of honor at the sort of party that we don't feel we even deserve.

Grace is a part of our faith. The name of our meeting room here is the Cana Room. Named after this very miracle of Jesus filling up the containers with wine at the wedding. This ought to always remind us that we ought to live in an attitude and framework of abundance. Confident that we will always be ok. Confident that Jesus will fill us up. And that God will always show up and be present with us even when we least expect it.

Amen