

“Embracing the Unexpected”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament Lesson: Proverbs 3:5-10

New Testament Lesson: John 2:1-11

It was just over a year ago that we had the wedding of Alyssa Vansandt and Garrett Ferguson right here in this sanctuary. On Tuesday last week, Alyssa and Garrett welcomed their first child into the world. Think back to such milestones in your life, or the life of your family. As we consider today’s scripture passage, we see that Jesus takes the time to celebrate such milestones, attending someone’s wedding right on the verge of his public ministry.

Weddings and the birth of a baby are joyous and miraculous events, worthy of our praise and celebration. It’s no wonder we see Jesus and his disciples, along with Mary the mother of Jesus, celebrating the wedding at Cana.

What is surprising is that Jesus turned the water into wine, that he picked that day, that event to do something miraculous. Why would he do that? Was it so the party could continue? Did he decide *that* was the time and place for him to work his first known miracle, and if so, why? Why then? Why that way – turning water into wine? Was it important to him – and to God – that the disciples witness that particularly miracle, at that particular occasion?

These are the questions we will explore during our sermon time this morning, as well as what all this means for us, for how we approach things in our daily lives. The last two weeks we’ve each been focusing on a current, troubling project or decision, or maybe a calling you sense that just seems to be a struggle at every turn. I invite you to think about that again this morning or pick something right now – something you’ve been struggling with, recently or maybe for years. I’ll give you a minute to think of something, something you’re struggling with.

Last week we saw that the only way to make real and lasting progress in a situation such as the one you’re thinking about is to try something new. Once you’ve tried everything you can think of or deal with, trying something new is the only way forward. The reason we resist trying something new when all else has failed us is because embracing new ways always opens us up to the unexpected, and that’s uncomfortable. We like to be in control.

Today, we will look at the hidden blessing that can come when we give ourselves over to the unexpected, to allow all our reservations and fears to melt away in favor of trying something new, even when we don't know 100% how things will work out.

We see this approach in how Jesus – the man, the miracle worker – lived his life. Jesus embraced uncertainty by virtue of his human nature, having self-limited his divine knowledge in order to live among us as fully human. In that self-limiting, Jesus embraced uncertainty. In the garden, for instance, he prayed saying, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup (symbolizing the crucifixion) from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”

We see Jesus embrace the unexpected not only there at the end of his public ministry – prior to his triumphant resurrection – but also here at the wedding of Cana, which actually is the beginning of his public ministry. At both places – Cana and the cross – Jesus is faced with a crisis involving the cup, the cup of salvation fulfilled at the cross and a cup of wine at Cana.

Surely there is significance here, something for us to learn and apply as we seek to live blessed and miraculous lives as followers of Christ. So let's look at the wedding at Cana. The Apostle John tells us that Jesus and his disciples are at the wedding when the wine gives out, and the mother of Jesus says to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus says to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.”

Jesus has a sense that he is to do great things to the glory of God and for the salvation of humankind, but he's pretty sure keeping the wine flowing at a party is not one of them. His mother persists, saying to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Can't you see it? Dear, sweet Mary has become the consummate Jewish mother – “Let my boy help you, he can fix anything!” Cue the eye-roll for Jesus.

But instead of standing his ground regarding what he expects might be his first public miracle, Jesus embraces this unexpected moment as possibly just what God has in mind for him. He turns to the servants and says, “Fill the jars with water.” Now at this point, there's no certainty that they will do what Jesus asks. He's a guest, not the bridegroom in charge of the celebration. And after all, it was his mother who started this whole thing; not Jesus, but a woman of low degree with no business instructing the household servants to do anything. Still, everyone seems content to let this play out. The servants fill the jars and Jesus says to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.”

And John tells us, “When the steward tasted the water that had become wine – and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew) – the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the

good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you, you have kept the good wine until now.”

And all of a sudden, we see the importance of Jesus' first miracle at that wedding in Cana. This is a story about the bridegroom, not Jesus. When Jesus asks his mother, “Woman, what concern is (it) to you and to me” that they have run out of wine, he is pointing to the real need here – the bridegroom, who was responsible for the wine.

The bridegroom was about to suffer terribly. It was a big deal back then if he failed to provide for his guests, not to mention his bride. Jesus performs this miracle not for his own sake, but for the sake of the bridegroom.

It is only in retrospect, in the fullness of God's revelation through the entirety of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, that we see the deeper, richer, more powerful meaning of this simple, little miracle (if there is such a thing). And of course, that's the point! There are no simple, little miracles. God is working through the ordinary of life to do the extraordinary, that miraculous, salvation work of Christ.

Furthermore, even in the ordinary events of your life, our lives. When Jesus kept the celebration going by turning water into wine, his disciples began to see that this wedding was the start of a much greater celebration, the celebration of God incarnate come to save humankind from our misguided ways and the power of sin and evil.

And also, just as important, when Jesus saved the bridegroom from embarrassment, the servants saw his concern for the human condition, even the most ordinary aspects of our lives, like struggling to make ends meet or achieving your next big goal.

Finally, the more astute among them may have seen even more. They would have known that the jars that were filled with water were there for the purification ritual required of the Jewish faithful.

Here, we see that Jesus is our source of purification, the cup of our salvation, washing away our sin and pointing us to a bold, fearless and blessed future in confidence of the risen Lord. Jesus is the cup of the new covenant, glimpsed at the wedding in Cana, and fulfilled at the cross on Calvary Hill. And yet, it was Mary who spoke up and saved the day at that wedding. She didn't know for sure what to expect, but she did have faith in Jesus, and through her faith, the miraculous began to unfold right before our eyes, through something as simple as a cup of wine.

Like Mary, you too can do miraculous things through your faith in Jesus. Having faith in Jesus means embracing the unexpected, embracing your true self, becoming more than you know yourself to be. “Embracing Your True Self” is the title of next week’s sermon of our final sermon in this series titled “Jesus – the Man; the Miracle Worker.”

Next week, we will look at a time when Jesus approached a crossroads, as he lived into his fullness as Lord and Savior, a time when he had to embrace his true self. We will see that trying something new and embracing the unexpected may mean embracing a whole new outlook on your life.

It will certainly mean being open to changing who you are – who you have been being – in relation to your next season of life, whether that’s finishing school, starting your career, getting married, having a family, facing retirement, or moving through your twilight years. We’ll look at that next week - who we are and who we’re meant to be.

But for now, think again about that project or decision you’re struggle with. You can’t know what to expect when you step out in faith and try something new. But you can be sure that Jesus cares, even about your troubles, just like he cared about the bridegroom.

You can be sure that Jesus is ready to work a miracle in your life, just like he did for Mary and the others surrounding him that day in Cana. You can be sure that there is more to Jesus than meets the eye, that he is more than you can imagine. You can be sure that Jesus is ready and able to do something miraculous in your life, as you come to discover and embrace your true self in preparation for your next season of life. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Celebration, joy, hope! These are the gifts you give to us, Jesus. You turn our mourning into dancing, you take our ashes and transform them into beauty. Thank you, Jesus.

Help us to come to you, not only when we are sorrowful, but also when we are celebrating.

You desire to rejoice with us; for you are the reason we can celebrate. We thank you for successful surgeries for our friends and family and for people everywhere, and for the wonders of modern medicine.

We give you praise for the friends we have and the compassion they channel our way.

We seek to glorify you through the work of this church and the faith of its members and friends, which we celebrate in our Annual Meeting today.

And most of all, we are humbled and encourage by your Living Word, in scripture and in Spirit, and by the words you gave us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**