

“Party Time”

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¹On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come" ⁵His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. ⁹When 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 ¹⁰and said to him, "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." ¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. (John 2:1-11)

In the Gospel of John, the first miracle of Jesus happened at a party. I think that is a good place to start, because if we miss that, we miss an important aspect of who Jesus is, and what Jesus is all about. John called them “signs” – signs of power – signs that show us the nature of Christ. And “the first of his signs” took place at a party.

And not just any party. In those days, a wedding feast was the ultimate party. Even today, cultures around the globe – especially those around the Mediterranean and the Middle East -- reserve their most exuberant and joyful celebrations for happy couples on their wedding days. It’s true for us as well. Wedding receptions are wonderful, joyful occasions. And this wedding feast in Cana was no different. The truth is that Jesus was never apologetic about the joys of eating and drinking and celebrating with all kinds of people, because joy and love and gratitude were things that he always embraced. As he would say later in this same gospel, everything I have taught you, everything I have said to you, I have said “*so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*”¹ Jesus loves parties because Jesus loves joy -- and when the people of God are filled with joy, Jesus cannot help but join the celebration.

And, for Jesus, parties were not just about joy. They were about abundance – not a selfish, “grab-as-much-as-you-can” kind of abundance -- but the kind of abundance we feel in those moments when we pause for a moment, and look around us, and realize just how full our lives really are, how *blessed* we really are. This is another thing that Jesus says very explicitly in the gospel of John. “*I came that they may have life,*” Jesus says, “*and have it abundantly.*”²

It is difficult to miss the joyful abundance of this party in Cana, because it almost didn’t happen. In fact, this whole sign of power thing got started because this party was about to fall flat. As The Beatles once said, “When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me... and in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me, speaking

¹ John 15:9-11.

² John 10:10.



words of wisdom..." Well, Mary did just that at this party. She found Jesus, and she stood right in front of him, and she said ominously, "They have no wine."

And, in that hour of darkness, the brokenhearted people living in that world agreed that this was a major problem... that they could not just "let it be." Now, Jesus' first inclination was to do nothing, but Mother Mary spoke her "words of wisdom," and because Jesus was without sin, that meant he had to listen to his mama. So, Jesus turns six jars of water into wine and the party was saved.

It is a helpful reminder, for those of us in the church, of the things that God wants for us. We tend to take things pretty seriously in the church, and that makes sense, because the mission of the church is serious. Worshipping God is serious business. Sin is serious business. Proclaiming the truth, fighting injustice, caring for those in need, exhibiting the Kingdom of God to the world: these things should all be taken seriously in the church. But if we are serious about exhibiting the Kingdom of God to the world, then we also need to remember that the Kingdom of God is like a wedding feast – a joyful, abundant celebration of life at its best. I think the preacher, professor and author Tony Campolo has said it best. He wrote a book entitled, "The Kingdom of God is a Party." And in that book he does not describe the kind of parties we might imagine – parties of decadence, selfishness, or greedy prosperity – but parties that reflect the joyful abundance of lives led in service to God and other people... the kind of parties that are described in the passage from Deuteronomy that we read this morning, where people who love God bring the very best of what they have to offer to share it with others. God's kingdom is like a party, Campolo says. It's not a funeral. It's a party. And God's party is for everyone.

My favorite story from that book is a story I heard Campolo tell back in 1989. I was nineteen, so I will pause for you all to do that math. I heard him tell this story at a conference, and I've never forgotten it. The story comes from a time when Campolo had been invited to speak at a conference in Honolulu, Hawaii. The time difference had messed him up, and he couldn't sleep. At 3 a.m., he finally decided to just get up and find something to eat. The only place open at that hour was a small greasy spoon. It had earned the distinction. Everything was greasy, even the menu. When the cook, dressed in a dirty white apron, lumbered over to take his order, he just asked for coffee and a donut.

Right then, the door flew open and about 8 or 9 rowdy women came stumbling in. He had been the only customer, so Campolo had taken a seat right in the middle of the counter, and this group of women parted and took the seats on both sides of him. The jet-lagged preacher was now completely surrounded by women that Victorian preachers would have called "sinners," or perhaps "fallen women." Jesus would have called them prostitutes. Campolo said he tried to make himself very small.

Still, he couldn't help but overhear their loud conversations. A woman a few seats down from him leaned over and addressed the whole crowd. "Hey, everybody," she said. "Tomorrow is my birthday. I'm going to be 39."

The woman beside her responded immediately. "So what? So, it's your birthday. What do you want me to do about it? Do you think we're going to throw you a party or somethin'?"

"Why do you have to be so mean?" she replied. "I don't expect you to do anything. I've never had a party in my whole life. Why would I expect one now?"

After a while the women cleared out, leaving the preacher alone again with the greasy guy in the apron. "Do they come in here every night?" he asked the cook.

"Those girls? Yeah, they come in here a lot."

“The woman that was sitting right there, does *she* come in here every night?”

“Agnes? Yeah, she’s here every night. Why do you ask?”

“I heard her say her birthday is tomorrow. Why don’t you and I set this place up and throw her a birthday party tomorrow night?”

The cook’s face lit up immediately. “That’s a great idea!” He called back to his wife in the kitchen. “Hey, honey,” he said, “this guy wants to throw a birthday party for Agnes tomorrow night!”

The wife came out from the back and grabbed his hand. “That’s a wonderful idea,” she said. “I know this sounds strange, “but she is a really nice person and she’s done many wonderful things for people” [no judgment...].

The cook in the apron insisted on baking and decorating the cake. Campolo said he’d get some decorations. The next day, after the conference, he bought some crepe paper streamers and made a poster board sign with the words “Happy Birthday Agnes!” written on it. And the next night, early in the morning, Campolo, the cook and his wife decorated the diner.

As the hours went by, it became apparent that word had gotten out on the streets of Honolulu. By 3 a.m., the place was packed. Every “fallen woman” in Honolulu showed up. When Agnes walked in, the diner erupted in unison with a loud “Happy Birthday!” She was completely stunned. The group launched into the birthday song, and as the last verse came to a close, the cook came in with an amazing multi-tiered birthday cake blazing with 39 candles. When she saw the cake, Agnes lost it. She began to tremble. Tears flowed down her cheeks. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t say a word.

The cook couldn’t stand it. “Blow out the candles, Agnes!” he yelled. “Blow out the candles.” She just stood there paralyzed. “Blow out the candles, Agnes!” the cook said again. “If you don’t blow out the candles, I will!” He actually did blow them out, and then immediately moved to the next thing. “Cut the cake, Agnes! Cut the cake...”

That’s when Agnes finally got her breath. “Hey, let me keep the cake,” she said softly. “Can I? It’s OK right? I’ve never had one before. I just want to keep it for a few days. Can I just take it to my apartment?” Of course, they all said she could. She picked the cake up off the counter, and the crowd parted as Agnes carried the first birthday cake she had ever received out the door, holding it like it was the most precious thing in the world.

When the door closed behind her, the room was completely silent. No one moved. No one said a word. The preacher didn’t know what to do. Finally, Campolo simply said, “What do you say we pray?”

So, at 4 a.m., in a greasy spoon in Honolulu, he led all of them in a prayer... a reverent, respectful, heartfelt prayer. They prayed that Agnes would be comforted. They prayed that the Lord would bring her peace, that God would plant his joy in her, and that Christ would enact one of his “signs of power” in her life.

When they had all said “Amen,” a heavy hush fell over the room. Once again, it was the cook who spoke first. “Hey, you didn’t say you were a preacher. What kind of church do you preach in?”

As it so happens, sometimes God gives us just the right words in just the right moment. This was one of those times. “I belong to a church,” Campolo said, “that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.”

“No you don’t,” the cook answered. “I would join a church like that.”

And a thought entered into Campolo's spirit that has never left him, a thought that has never left my spirit since the first time I heard that story, the thought ... "Who wouldn't? Who wouldn't want to be part of a church like that?"

That, my friends, is the church of Jesus Christ. That is what the Kingdom of God is really like. It is a party – a party that celebrates the joyful abundance of God's love... the joyful abundance that comes when every person knows they are loved... every person knows they are cherished just for being who they are... sinners and tax collectors... the crippled, the lame, and the blind... people who have made mistakes... people who have regrets.

In your Mission Study back in 2020, you all said that you want LAC to be a church where people feel safe sharing who they really are... a church where we are connected not only by what we do well, but also by the things we do not do so well... a place where we can be honest with each other in the assurance that all of us are precious in God's sight, no matter what. What you are describing is the Kingdom of God.

And the Kingdom of God is many things. But it begins with joy... it begins with the abundance of things that matter to God. It begins with a party.

Amen.