

A WEDDING TO REMEMBER – JANUARY 14, 2007

Preached by the Rev. Ruth E. Shaver at the United Church of Schellsburg, Schellsburg, PA
The Second Sunday after Epiphany
Psalm 36:5-10, John 2:1-11

I can see just by looking at you all that you've never been to a wedding in Israel. Can I tell you what a wedding in Israel is like, in this time of Roman occupation? I just bet your weddings aren't anything like mine was!

Weddings in Israel are a great big party paid for by the groom and his family. Now, when I say great big party, I mean huge – enormous, even. Every relative on both the groom's side and the bride's side is invited and every acquaintance in the village, too. Friends of the relatives of the bride and the groom are invited. A small wedding by our standards is 200 people, and that's if the groom's family or the bride's family isn't well liked and their friends don't come. The average wedding includes 500 people.

For seven days and nights.

Like I said, a great big party.

Great big parties require a lot of food and a lot of wine. Food isn't too hard to come by, because almost everybody in Israel has a garden and nearly every town has an olive grove and an orchard for oranges and other fruits. Part of the wedding ceremony includes sacrificing a bull, so there's always plenty of meat.

But on rare occasions, the wine runs short.

Sometimes the wine runs short because people drink far more than they should. We aren't supposed to do that – getting drunk isn't approved of by the religious authorities and besides, getting drunk usually means getting sick and missing a part of the party, which is considered rude. More often, the wine runs short because some people who attend the wedding don't bring the traditional gift of wine like they're supposed to. Or, like at my wedding in Cana, there are too many rabbis with their students, who aren't required to bring wine. And almost every rabbi and every student comes with a wife and possibly children, too.

My husband, you see, is a rabbi. None of his students brought wine. None of my husband's 8 rabbi friends or their students brought wine, either. His father tried to make up for that much wine by providing more than his fair share, but I think my father-in-law forgot something when he made his calculations.

My brother Jesus was also a rabbi. And he had 12 students – he called them disciples – who didn't have to bring wine, either.

So out of the 700 people at the wedding, about 100 weren't expected to bring wine for the party. And those 100 men came with almost 300 other people, by the time we counted wives and children.

The wine my father-in-law and others gave as the traditional gift lasted until the third day of our wedding celebration. I didn't know much of this at the time – it's not my place as the bride to pay attention to the details during the party – but my husband's chief steward was terribly worried and embarrassed. Running out of wine looks bad all the way around, for him and for my husband and for my husband's entire family. Eventually, probably for my family, too, because why would they allow me to marry into a family that isn't well enough liked to have plenty of wine for the wedding? Never mind the rabbi thing; you know people never take extenuating circumstances into account when spreading rumors.

I'm still not sure how exactly my mother Mary found out that there was a problem with the wine supply. Knowing her, she was trying to manage things behind the scenes in order to make the wedding go exactly like it should. The last thing she wanted was anything that might make the family look bad. She had always been that way, and it seemed so odd when I was growing up. But as things turned out with my brother, I understand now why she wanted us to have a sterling reputation. I didn't know until after I was married just how badly Nazareth is viewed by the rest of the country – and being from Nazareth made Jesus suspect to the religious authorities even before anything happened to make him famous. Or infamous, but more about that later.

Mama heard about the shortage of wine and went to find Jesus. I remember thinking at the time that it was awfully strange for her to pull him away from the dancing because he loved to do that more than just about anything in the world. And he was a good dancer, too. When we were children, our father Joseph nicknamed him "the lord of the dance" because he danced around the house and the yard to music no one else could hear. Jesus said it was God's music.

Given what happened later, I wouldn't be at all surprised that he did hear God's music from a very early age.

Anyway, I saw Jesus grimace at Mama and it looked like he was going to argue, but something she said soothed him long enough for her to get him away from the party. She told me later what had happened.

Back in the wine cellar, the steward was pouring out the last of the wine – and not good wine, either. It was the wine my father-in-law kept for the tax collectors and soldiers who occasionally stopped to speak with the village elders. He always says that no one who worked for Rome deserved more than swill, and this wine was worse than the swill for the cows, frankly. I couldn't stand the smell of it.

Mama asked the steward what could be done.

"Nothing, I'm afraid, ma'am," he told her. "Water doesn't magically become wine and we have no fermented goat's milk or beer to make up for the lack of wine." She says he laughed, then added, "Unless, of course, one of these many rabbis can work miracles."

According to Mama, Jesus turned around and walked out then. I believe that; even later, he didn't like to be put on display. To my knowledge, he had never done anything that could be considered miraculous before then, anyway. I don't know if it was right for Mama to ask of him what she did when she caught up with him in the courtyard. But Mama has never been shy about asking for what she wants.

"They have no wine, my son," she said. "You can change that."

"Not now, Mother," Jesus replied to her. "It's not yet time for me to show God's signs to the people. Besides, why should we be concerned?"

"Because your sister's reputation is at stake," she told him. "And yours, too. Do you want it known that you married your sister off to someone who couldn't provide enough wine for the wedding?"

The way Mama tells it, Jesus just looked at her with the vacant gaze we had come to associate with his most profound observations. In light of what happened later, I think those were the moments he was listening to God's voice most closely. Whether God was telling him that his ministry would be harmed by the rumors about his choice of a husband for me (since our father Joseph died when I was five, it had been Jesus' responsibility to make the match) or that it was, indeed, the time for the first sign to be revealed, no one will ever know.

What we do know is that a miracle happened that day.

Jesus sighed – he was very good at that, by the way – and said, "Let it be as you have asked, Mother."

Mama gathered the servants and told them to follow his orders. She knew they would, if only out of respect for me. Had she not been a new relative, we wouldn't have gotten our

miracle. Anyway, once she gave them that command, she came back to the party and spent the next several hours dancing with her grandchildren.

The servants told us what happened next.

Jesus went into the room reserved for study and worship, a room my father-in-law built for my husband when he became a rabbi. The six stone jars that usually held water for the purification rituals were empty because my husband and I had prepared for the wedding by purifying ourselves according to custom – full baths in blessed water. Three stone jars full for each of us, and no one would ordinarily need to fill them up again until just before the next Sabbath.

But Jesus told the servants to fill the jars as full as possible from the village well right then. This meant that the six servants had to make about 15 trips each to the well to fill those jars, because it takes 30 full buckets to fill a single jar, and each servant could carry 2 buckets at a time. That's a lot of water and it took some time to do it.

But the jars were finally brimming full and Jesus put the lids on top of the jars. According to the servant, he said the traditional Sabbath prayer over wine:

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech halom. Borei peri hagafen.

"Blessed are you God, our God, ruler of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine."

And then my brother, Jesus, told the servants to draw some out of each of the jars and take the contents to the chief steward.

The servants who told us this said that they were all expecting the same water they put into the jars. Their eyes glistened when they told us that instead, they drew out the most beautiful claret wine any of them had ever seen, crystal clear and fragrant as the most mellow of fine aged wines. No one could mistake that for water.

When the servants took the wine to the chief steward, he smiled for the first time that day and thanked the servants for finding such wonderful wine hidden away in a forgotten corner of the cellar. Before they could correct him, he found my husband and my father-in-law and me and shared a glass of the wine with each of us.

"You have outdone yourself, Rabbi," the steward said to my husband. "No one saves the good wine for the end of the party, yet here you have saved the best for last. This will be a wedding to remember for all time!"

Little did he know how true his words were.

The wedding went on, all seven glorious days of celebration, with everyone remarking about the good wine. The story spread quickly, though for a while, no one knew how the good wine had come to be. Not until the servants spoke at Sabbath services a few weeks later did the story of Jesus' miracle come about. Not everyone believed them, but I did and so did my husband.

My husband had heard about what happened at the Temple when Jesus went to Jerusalem for Passover – that Jesus had overturned the tables of the moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial animals, calling them “thieves” and “liars”. The chief priest and the Sanhedrin were up in arms about this and Jesus was considered a rabble-rouser by some of them. But according to my husband, Jesus was doing something important, something that needed to be done – returning the faith to the people. The religious authorities in Jerusalem had made it very difficult for the common people to be good Jews by imposing regulations and laws that went beyond what the Torah taught. Most of the rules and laws, both Jesus and my husband believed, were to designed to make the religious leaders rich at the expense of the poor.

My husband began to teach the same message that Jesus was teaching and even went to hear Jesus teach on the hillsides whenever he and his disciples were close enough. I went with him one day, hoping to talk to my brother and caution him about his behavior. The crowds that followed him or that came to hear him weren't always friendly and I knew that even some of my husband's rabbi friends went to hear him in hopes of having enough to bring charges of blasphemy and sedition against him.

I never did get to talk to Jesus that day, but I did witness a miracle for myself. He fed a hungry crowd a wonderful lunch of bread and fish.

Just as the servants had said about how Jesus changed water into wine, Jesus said a traditional Sabbath prayer, this time over a loaf bread:

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech halom. Hamotzi lechem meen haaretz.

“Blessed are you God, our God, ruler of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”

With this prayer, Jesus took the 5 small loaves of bread and 2 fish given by a little boy and shared them with nearly 10,000 people – 5,000 men and as many women and children with them. And had *leftovers*.

Water turned into the best wine. Five loaves and two fish into a meal for a multitude with food to spare. Little boys raised from near death, the lame made to walk again, the deaf made

to hear and the blind made to see. The possessed healed of their demons, a woman cured of a hemorrhage and restored to her community, lepers made clean... religious authorities made angry.

A year after my wedding, the religious authorities arrested my brother in the Garden of Gethsemane on the first night of Passover. My husband and I were with my mother that night at my brother James' house in Jerusalem, celebrating the Passover with them. One of Jesus' disciples came to the house and told us what had happened. We left the house as quickly as we could and went to the Temple to see if there was anything we could do to stop what we all knew, in the end, would happen.

The next few days are a blur in my memory, even now. Trials, Pilate washing his hands, the parade through the streets to Calvary, the crucifixion, the hasty burial – the empty tomb which we didn't understand until later, when Jesus came to us and explained more of what was happening.

After the resurrection, wine took on a much deeper meaning for us when we gathered to remember and celebrate. So did bread. Wine and bread came to represent the miracle of plenty, of God's abundant love and grace shown so clearly in Jesus' ministry and in his willingness to die to bring people closer to God.

There's a new apostle, Paul, who says that my brother died to take away the sins of the world. Paul never met Jesus when he was alive, so I don't think Paul understands all of what Jesus actually taught. To my knowledge, Jesus never said he would die for the world. He did say that he would be killed, and I'm sure he knew that it would be the result of his teachings against the Sanhedrin and other authorities. The people with religious authority and power don't want to lose that authority and power. If what Jesus taught and preached is practiced by the common people, then the Sanhedrin and priests will no longer get fat and rich from people's sacrifices and from the fines people must pay to be purified. Paul thinks those of us who follow Jesus should stop being Jews. My husband and my brother James think he's wrong.

I think it doesn't matter whether we're Jews or something else. When Jesus said that we should love the Lord our God with our whole hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves, I don't think he cared much whether the people who heard him were Jews or Gentiles. I think he care that we do it. I'm worried that the fight over who can be a follower of Jesus will get in the way of his message, which is a message the rabbis have taught for a long, long time.

I don't care what I'm called. I will do my best to live by what Jesus said, echoing rabbis throughout time, and I will remember my brother with love whenever I enjoy a glass of wine or have a piece of bread. Most of all, I will remember the joy Jesus brought to a wedding celebration when he gave us the greatest wedding gift, the best wine in great abundance, and I will remember the wonder of a crowd fed with 5 loaves and 2 fishes. Those were miracles that point to the one promised to us in the Psalms:

“All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.”

What more can we ask from our God?