



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
LISTENING ALONGSIDE: ECHOING CHRIST

Listen for the Laughter
Psalm 100; John 2:1-11

Wedding parties are usually fun affairs with plenty of food and drink, good music (though sometimes a bit too loud), and a general sense of happiness among all in attendance. Every once in a while something goes wrong and everything possible is done to keep the guests from knowing and spoiling the event for them. On one occasion, I had a chance to relive a biblical experience when I witnessed the host at a wedding party hand his credit card to a helper who was on his way to the nearby Food Lion to replenish the stock of wine. The folks in Cana weren't the only ones to run low on the fruit of the vine.

Here we are again in Cana, a little town in the hills of Galilee, not far from Nazareth, but something of a rival village. You will remember that the Apostle Nathaniel hailed from Cana. When told by Philip that he had found the Messiah who was Jesus of Nazareth, Nathaniel sneered and said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:43-51). When he met Jesus, however, he changed his tune. Not long after, Jesus and his disciples attended a wedding in Nathaniel's home village. We know that Jesus' mother was there as well, so it may have been the marriage of a relative. At some point during the celebration (which typically lasted a week or more) there was a problem: they ran out of wine. Having no Food Lion close by, they had a really big problem because the family faced enormous embarrassment because of either poor planning or lack of adequate funds.¹ Somehow Jesus' mother got involved and told him to do something. Doesn't every mother think her darling child is something of a savior of the day?! Jesus appears to be rude, though, in truth, he is not. Mary tells the servants who have suddenly appeared to do whatever Jesus tells them. Forced to act or embarrass his mother, Jesus instructs them to fill the jars used for purification with water and take a sample to the steward of the party. Unaware that any of this activity has been taking place, the steward rushes to the bridegroom and wants to know what is going on. Most folks serve the good wine first and, when the guests are getting a little tipsy, they pull out the cheap stuff. This bridegroom,

¹Gerald L. Borchert, "Commentary on John," in *Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, gen. eds. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 1049.

however, has saved the very best wine for last. The party is saved. Everyone is happy. And we are told that this is the first of Jesus' signs.

A sign? We thought it was a miracle. In fact, we consider it one of our favorite miracle stories. If I asked you to name a couple of miracles that Jesus performed, you would likely mention this one and the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. John insists, however, that it was a sign. If so, to what does it point? What is the sign saying?

I read this story and I think of the ballroom scene in *The Sound of Music*. You remember it. Everyone is dressed in their finest Austrian formal wear. The music is swirling gaily through the crowd and old friends are enjoying an evening of dancing, dining, and delight. The governess Maria teaches the Von Trapp children an old folk dance and then they sing themselves off to bed to rousing applause. There is laughter and gaiety and all seems right with the world. But trouble is brewing. For one, Captain Von Trapp is engaged to the wrong woman and the Baroness herself knows it. On a larger scale, the advancing German army is about to overtake Austria and silence the music and the laughter. There is a joyous feast, but trouble is coming in the door.

The movie is about personal love and love of country. It is about the importance of a relationship rooted in real affection rather than convenience and the difficult choices one must sometimes make when allegiance to justice and the prevailing power are at odds. It is about what happens when the laughter stops and dark silence prevails.

The mother of Jesus knew there was a problem and wanted to nip it in the bud. She knew Jesus could help, but did not quite know how to go about it. Jesus did what was needed and the laughter increased as the celebration continued. Where does this sign point?

I think this story—this sign—sets the tone for the rest of Jesus' ministry. Think about it: wherever Jesus goes he discovers a lack of something. There is a lack of health in people who have diseases or are blind or lame. There is a lack of food for the people gathered on the hillside to hear him teach. There is a lack of money among most of the people in the countryside and many of the people who live within the walls of Jerusalem. There is a lack of respect and dignity for entire groups of people generally known as "sinners"—tax collectors and prostitutes, to name a couple. There is a lack of righteousness, not among the common folk, but within the ranks of the

religious elite. And there is a lack of justice throughout the land for rarely is fairness and what is right observed.

When God breathed life into this little planet sitting in the midst of billions of galaxies throughout an expanding universe, everything was pronounced “good.” Goodness and abundance were the idea and the Garden was the ideal. This was the first sign in God’s unfolding story with humanity for God’s intent was that we live together in harmony with one another and in unity with creation. No wonder the psalmist sang out loud and clear,

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.
Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations. Psalm 100

This psalm is so much more than a hymn we sing at Thanksgiving. It should be an anthem of all of God’s children, not just a few. You would think that a psalm like this one, so widely known and joyfully sung, would result in radical justice for all people. Surely when we realize how blessed we are, we would want everyone to enjoy the fullness of God’s blessing. Yet that is not how our world operates. Instead of listening to the actual words of the psalm, we tend to hear it in a vastly different way:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, O my soul.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.
Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made me, and I am his;
I am his child, a sheep of his pasture.
I will enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.
I will give thanks to him and bless his name.
For the Lord is good to me; his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all my people.

Perhaps without realizing it, we change the radical nature of this song of praise from including all people of the earth to mean my family, my clan, my community, or my nation. Instead of rejoicing that God has provided an abundance for all people, we live in fear, afraid of losing what we have if other people share the bounty with us. Rather than recognizing that I am one sheep among many, I see myself as the lost lamb for whom Jesus left the other ninety-nine in order to track me down. Rather than understanding that God's love and faithfulness span all space and time and include all people, I want to see myself as God's chosen one.

But Jesus will have none of that. When people were believed to be disabled because of some sin they or their parents committed, Jesus healed them. When someone was alienated from the community because of a disease like leprosy or the poor choice of a lifestyle, Jesus welcomed them with the healing touch of compassion. When a career choice like collecting taxes branded someone a sinner, Jesus ate lunch with them. When people were denied fair wages or treatment simply because someone in authority could do so, Jesus used them as an example of God's tender mercy. When the religious leaders who were supposed to teach truth to the people became self-righteous and smug, Jesus exposed their lack of faith and called them to account.

For Jesus, all people are sheep in his flock and all should have cause for joy and laughter. That is why he explained that he had come to earth in order for us all to enjoy life in its fullness (John 10:10). He wanted plenty of wine at the party so that everyone enjoyed themselves and no one suffered embarrassment. A wedding feast is supposed to be a happy occasion for everyone present because it is the celebration of a new beginning in life. Jesus' presence in our world was the sign of a new beginning for us all. God intends that life is to be a bountiful experience for all people.

The story of the sign at the wedding in Cana of Galilee points us to Jesus' desire for justice for all people. There was a problem at the feast and Mary brought it to Jesus' attention. Like many of us, she had some notion that Jesus was something of a magician who could snap his fingers and make things happen. Despite her own important role in Jesus' life, she had not fully grasped the fact that "God uses persons to bring about the divine purpose."² That is why Jesus invited the servants to fill the jars with water and why the steward was given the first drink of the new wine. Jesus discovered a

²Borchert.

problem and promptly involved the people around him in solving it. Then the steward announced the good news: “You have kept the good wine until now.”

Jesus went about teaching and preaching and meeting the needs of the people in order to let them know that “the best is happening right now.” The kingdom of God is in our midst, all around us, he kept telling people. All we have to do is make it obvious. In other words, if we will live as if the kingdom of God is here, then it will be. That makes sense!

The wedding at Cana, like most of the feasting stories Jesus told, is intended to be a parable of God’s intended way of life for us. Life should be a feast of all the good things God has provided for us, but it is a feast to which all people are invited, not just a few. There is a place at the table for everyone, including sinners and enemies. That means there is a space for each of us.

Do you remember that other scene in *The Sound of Music*, the one in which Captain Von Trapp, his fiancée the Baroness, and their friend Max are driving toward home and see a group of children swinging in the trees, laughing and singing? A bit later, the Captain sees them again, his own children, wearing play clothes made from old drapes, falling out of a boat into the water, laughing all the while. Because of his own grief, he had not heard or allowed his children to laugh in a long time. Maria’s coming was like a release from prison, but the Captain threatened to return the children to their chains. When music and laughter reminded him of the better days of his life, however, he set them—and himself—free again. The movie ends, you remember, on a mountaintop, tyranny and oppression behind them, God’s big, beautiful, and bountiful creation lies before them.

Wherever you hear laughter, you will find justice present, for injustice of any kind will silence laughter in a heartbeat. We need to listen for the laughter in our neighborhoods and in our homes. We need to listen for the laughter in our state and nation. We need to listen for the laughter throughout the world. Right now, we do not hear a lot of laughter, do we? We hear a lot of anger and fussing and violence. We hear cries and tears and fears. Where is the goodness of the Lord? Where is the abundance of God’s grace? It is right here in our midst. All we have to do is share it.

The wedding party in Cana could have been ruined if the guests had begun complaining about not having enough wine. It could have been ruined if the bridegroom and the steward got in a shouting match over whose fault

it was that the wine had run out. The wedding party could have been ruined if the celebration of a new beginning turned into a grudge match that dredged up all past transgressions among the guests present.

How sad it is in our communities and nation and world that we fight over things like bathroom access, healthcare, education, housing, job opportunities, environmental concerns, national and world security, and a host of other issues that are basic human needs. We look around for Jesus to have him miraculously replenish the wine, but he will have none of that. He tells us to do something. In this big, wide world filled with such abundance, go plant the vines, harvest the grapes, ferment the wine, and celebrate the vintage. God has provided everything that any person on this earth needs to live a good and fulfilling life. All we need to do is make certain they have access to it. When all people truly enjoy the goodness of the Lord, the laughter will sound like a joyous hymn of praise echoing throughout the world. And isn't that what the psalmist urged us to do?

Listen for the laughter and find the joy. If the laughter is absent, find out why and fix the problem. Jesus showed us how. God has provided all we need. May the party continue and laughter abound! Amen.

March 19, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

The singing of birds, the clinking of breakfast dishes, the rustle of the morning paper, the first splash of coffee in the cup, the chatter of children, the familiar “Good morning!” of a spouse, the greeting of an old friend, the triumphant chords of the organ are all sounds of joy to us, O God. Even when we do not notice them, these familiar notes to the day together form a hymn of praise for your goodness to us. We are truly thankful, O God, for the common melodies of life that carry us through each day.

There is much for which to be grateful. The warmer days of spring are just ahead and already flowers have bloomed and blossoms are bursting on trees. The annual rebirth of the earth stirs a vitality within us and reminds us of the wonder of creation. The all-too-frequent goodbyes to dear friends are painful but carry with them the blessing of memories that will never be lost. In response to anxieties across the globe, we see efforts to work together to find peace among humanity. In the small moments spent with someone we love, we are reminded of the blessings you have given so abundantly to us.

So we ask that you hear our joyful thanksgivings, O God, and understand that we are grateful for every good gift that comes our way from your generous heart.

Understandably, some of our joy is muted because of the concerns we carry with us today. We have mentioned a long list of friends who need help. We whisper other names to you and still other needs are spoken in the silent recesses of our hearts. You know all too well the concerns of our community, nation, and world. We pray for well-being for all people. We ask for health and safety across the globe. We beg for peace and the end to all violence. We pray for justice for us all.

Listen to us, O God, and then teach us to listen to you. Answer our prayers and remind us that we are a part of those answers. Speak to us and enable us to speak good news to everyone around us. Join us, O God, in making joyful noise all the day long in praise and thanksgiving for the goodness of life which is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.