

More Than a Party Trick
First Reading - Isaiah 62:1-5
Second Reading - John 2:1-11

The Washington Post ran a sweet story this week that was 56 years in the making. In 1968, Barry and Margaret Sharman were married in the small western Canadian town of Enderby, B.C.. For any Canucks in attendance, Enderby is about a hundred miles east of Kamloops, a stop on the incredible Rocky Mountaineer train excursion. So, it's an understatement to call Enderby a rural community. The town is small enough that on the day of the wedding, the Sharman's wedding party had to drive over to Armstrong, another small town, in order to have their wedding photos taken at a photography studio. Then they drove back to Enderby for the reception at The Enderby Drill Hall (sounds like a small town reception venue, along with the VFW and American Legion Halls, or The Elk's Clubs and Moose Lodges).

Well, at the reception, one of the guests surprised the bride by picking her up and taking one of her shoes. He then proceeded to weave through the gathered guests encouraging them to stuff money into the shoe for the couple. Barry Sharman said that the shoe wound up holding enough to pay for their honeymoon, which is good, because times were tight. Margaret's

family had few resources, but thankfully her mother was a seamstress, and so she made a white wedding dress with embroidered daisies on the sleeves for Margaret along with pink dresses for each bridesmaid. The beauty of the wedding was in its simplicity. Margaret said that after wedding, her mother took the wedding dress and remade it for every local bride who could not afford one.

However, as I said, times were tight, and so after the wedding the couple did not return to the Photography studio in Armstrong to purchase the photos, feeling it was too extravagant a purchase. So, time passed, and they got busy raising a family, having moved to Vancouver Island. Several years later, Margaret decided to inquire about the wedding photos, but was disappointed to discover that the photography studio had closed and the photographer had left town with no way to contact him, so she just put it out of her mind and went on.

Fast forward 56 years from the wedding date, and one of Margaret's bridesmaids, Sandy Farynuk, who still lives in Enderby and heads up their Historical Society, which in a town like Enderby probably means Sandy is the Historical Society, received an email from someone she knew at the

Historical Museum in Armstrong. The email included an old black and white photo that her acquaintance noticed while going through items from a garage sale donated to the museum. It struck her that one of the women in the photo resembled Sandy. It was the photo of the bridal party from Margaret and Barry Sharman's wedding. Evidently, Sandy, 76, still closely resembled her 20 year old self enough so that an acquaintance, unprompted, picked her out of a 56 year old photo.

Well, a few weeks ago, on Christmas Eve, Margaret and Barry Sharman opened a package from Sandy containing wedding photos, their wedding photos, taken 56 years earlier, that they had never seen before. How's that for a Merry Christmas? It was clear that the photos brought tears of joy as opposed to pangs of regret. A touching reminiscence of a life-forming day that had remained so clear to Margaret and Barry even without the photos. The fact that they didn't have the cash to purchase the wedding photos back in the day did nothing to diminish the partnership of love they formed and kept over 56 years.

I am regularly, without much success, reminding young couples that the details of the wedding day, the perfection of the setting, and the

glamorous magnificence of the participants have very little to do with what makes a marriage healthy and lasting. With so much focus on the event and the party, there's little energy left to focus on the meaning and import of what they are actually doing at the wedding. Admittedly, most of the time my advice sounds to them like Charlie Brown's teacher — *Wa Wa Wa Wa...*

On the upside, their inability to listen to my counsel serves to support the livelihood of therapists in their future. Obviously, the imperfections of the wedding celebration did not distract Margaret and Barry from the meaning of what they were doing when they exchanged their vows — 56 years — and a wedding photo evokes joy. Oh, I'm sure there were challenges and stresses, tragedies and triumphs through the years. But after 56 years they visibly saw the image of themselves as newly married for the first time, and the reaction was joy.

Imagine if seeing those photos only evoked the regret of a love that faded long before. No, on that wedding day, they knew they were participating in something larger than themselves, even if they couldn't articulate it. Something beyond them would have to be trusted to hold them

close — the self-giving, steadfast, merciful, redeeming love that can only come from above.

It is not the impressiveness of the live band or the form fitting couture that will get folks to 56 years. There has to be something more. And it is as simple as this, John tells us elsewhere — “We love, because God first loved us.”

That’s the real miracle at Cana. Changing water into wine is impressive, a pretty neat party trick, but what Jesus was signaling in that act was far more remarkable and transformative.

Honestly, for the longest time I did not comprehend why John deemed this story important enough to include in his Gospel. How is liquor running out at a wedding equate with Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, giving sight to the blind, disarming the morality police intent on stoning the woman accused of adultery, or walking on water?

“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ How does that crisis rise to the level of a man who had been an

invalid for 38 years, or Jesus' close friend dying unexpectedly? *"Jesus, the open bar has been emptied out!"* Really? Now, you may say, "Yeah, but Matt, obviously, you have not met my family. A suddenly dry reception would spark a riot." Okay, I hear you, but, the bridegroom knew who was coming to the wedding, and knowing them, he ordered what he thought was plenty. So, it's not like the crowd was exactly dehydrated when the wine ran out. In fact, according to the wine steward the guests were already drunk.

But, fearing the young couple would have their wedding day marred by embarrassment, Mary rushes up to her boy genius, and says — *You gotta do something about this!* And here, John offers the most candid, real-to-life example of the interaction between a mother and a son — *You gotta do something about this!* And Jesus is like — *What do you want me to do about it?*

The Lord says, *"What concern is that to you and to me. My hour has not yet come."* — a first-Century version of *Not my problem*. And yet, Jesus did act ... and in a most extravagant way. Seeing the water jars reserved for the Jewish rite of purification, Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with water, and before you know it, you've got between 120 and 180 gallons of wine,

and this isn't Boone's Farm or Two Buck Chuck, it's Chateau Lafite Rothschild. The wine steward is impressed, but as stunning as Jesus' feat is, it doesn't seem to be Gospel worthy. Giving a drunk crowd a vintage wine they won't even appreciate doesn't exactly sound like a good idea, much less a validation of Jesus' divinity. The Greeks and the Romans already had gods pulling off that trick.

But here's the thing about John. John refers to this as a sign, and what does a sign do? A sign points to something beyond itself. A billboard for a Bucky's doesn't have a wall of beef jerky. No, the billboard points beyond itself to the actual Bucky's and its wall o' beef. Remember the Sharman's? A wedding photo from long ago wouldn't generate joy without pointing to the steadfast love it signifies. Remember that John is the theologian of the Gospel writers. There are always layers of meaning in John's words. Sure, the guests at the wedding at Cana are having a grand ol' time, much grander than they are going to feel about it in the morning, but John offers some clues to indicate that this event is a preview, a sign pointing to the Gospel as a whole.

Consider the language, the terms John employs in our text. Look at the opening words — “*On the third day...*” Sound familiar? Where have we heard these words before? ... *On the third day, he rose again from the dead.*

Then, where does this sign take place? A wedding reception, and if you read through the Bible you will find the image of a wedding celebration used frequently to give a sense of the celebration in the fulfilled kingdom of God. Christ is the bridegroom and the bride is the redeemed people of God. In Matthew 22, Jesus says, “*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. Who’s the son; who’s the bridegroom? Jesus. In Matthew 9, Jesus says, “The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”* Jesus is referring to his death. In John 3, Jesus says, “*He who has the bride is the bridegroom.*” And in Revelation 19, we read, *Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready...*” These refer to Jesus and the Church Triumphant, the redeemed people of God.

And how does Luke describe the gathering in the kingdom of God?

“Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.” In these and other texts we get the sense of the kingdom of God as a wedding feast where there is joy and abundance ... 180 gallons worth.

John sees the miracle at Cana as a sign pointing to the kingdom of God. And consider this. John specifically highlights the use of the water jars used for the Jewish rite of purification. Going all the way back to Leviticus, there was a big inventory of physical encounters that would render someone unclean, thus, preventing them from entering into the presence of God, prohibiting them from worship, denying them access to their Lord. It gets rather graphic and tawdry. They could only re-enter after engaging in the rite of purification by water and being declared clean by the priest.

The water rite provided a way of access. But as Martin Luther would realize, there is no holy water, soap, or scrub brush that can remove the stain of sin from us. Only God can grant that, and God does grant that ... but how? What do we say at baptism? This is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. What do we say when we partake in the

Lord's Supper? "After supper, Christ took the cup saying, 'This cup [of wine] represents [is a sign of] the new covenant in my blood that is shed for the sins of many.'" Outward and visible signs of an inward and invisible grace. God accomplishing for us what we cannot accomplish for ourselves. The elements are only efficacious as signs pointing to what God is doing through Christ.

We are in the process of acquiring what are called way finding signs. Signs located on our campus to help direct us to the places we are hoping to find in our facilities, arrows to Mecklenburg Hall, The Commons, The Preschool, The Office, The Sanctuary, the Chapel. The signs point beyond themselves to the places where significant things happen, much like the wedding photo that doesn't hold much meaning if it doesn't point those in it to the larger meaning of relationship and steadfast love.

Back in western Canada, Barry Sharman says, "I was flabbergasted when I saw the photos ... I have to laugh at the group photo where nobody is smiling. We look like we all came from a funeral. But I know we were actually very happy that day."

A sign is only helpful if it points us to that we seek and celebrate. The water of baptism points us to God's creative purpose, cleansing power, and redemptive promise. The wine of communion points us to the voice of Christ, saying, *"This cup represents the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for the sins of many. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me"* Similarly, if a photo doesn't point us to the love of those in it, it's just an awkward picture of strangers, estranged friends, and perhaps, enemies. We love, because God first loved us, and that is something to celebrate. Amen.