

February 3rd, 2013 FPC Allegan

Psalm 98

Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.<sup>2</sup> The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.<sup>3</sup> He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

<sup>4</sup> Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music;<sup>5</sup> make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing,<sup>6</sup> with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn— shout for joy before the LORD, the King.

<sup>7</sup> Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.<sup>8</sup> Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy;<sup>9</sup> let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

John 2:1-11

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there,<sup>2</sup> and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.<sup>3</sup> When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."<sup>4</sup> "Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come."

<sup>5</sup> His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."<sup>6</sup> Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.<sup>8</sup> Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so,<sup>9</sup> and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside<sup>10</sup> and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

<sup>11</sup> This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

Today is Sunday, and in the many centuries before this century, that used to mean something. It used to mean that people acted differently than the other days of the week in honor of worshipping God. In the classic book, *Little House in the Big Woods*, the beloved author Laura Ingalls Wilder describes what Sundays were like for her:

*"Every Sunday, both Mary and Laura were dressed from the skin out in their best clothes, and even put fresh ribbons in their hair. On Sundays, Mary and Laura must not run and shout or be noisy in their play. Mary could not sew on her nine patch quilt, and Laura could not knit on the tiny mittens she was making for baby Carrie. They might look quietly at their paper dolls, but they must not make anything new for them. They were not allowed to sew on doll clothes, even with pins. They must sit quietly while Ma read Bible stories to them or stories about lions and tigers and white bears from Pa's big green book, *The Wonders of the Animal World*. They might look at pictures, and they might hold their rag dolls nicely and talk to them, but there was nothing else they could do. "*

--It was not so many years ago that even for the members of this congregation that the life that they experienced on Sundays was very different than it is today. Many communities had "Blue Laws" that required that stores and

non essential businesses were to be closed on Sundays, schools never scheduled practices or games and civic events wouldn't even think of putting something on the calendar for a Sunday. It was a given that on Sundays, things should be different, that people would all dress in their Sunday best and head to the church of their choice to worship God both morning and evening. Dinners on Sunday after church were frequently even made on Saturday, so they could simply be reheated on Sunday. Even during Sunday afternoons the expectations used to be different. Certain loud or noisy activities were frowned upon. Even today on a church baseball diamond next to a Christian Reformed Church in Graafschaap Michigan there is a sign that says, "Absolutely No Baseball Playing on Sundays".

The Sundays that Laura Ingalls Wilder described and that many of you remember from your childhoods were in a lot of ways similar to the legalistic Sabbath laws that were practiced by Jews in Jesus time. In those days, Jewish Sabbath keeping was extremely strict. There was a limit on the number of steps that you could take on the Sabbath and there was a limit on how much work women could do to prepare food. Every little action for the Jewish people was prescribed and regulated so that God would not be offended if the people broke the Holy Sabbath day of rest.

But into this system of rules and legalistic thinking comes the very first miracle of Jesus. And instead of being a miracle of healing someone who was sick or feeding a group of people who were poor and hungry, the very first miracle of Jesus occurs at a party!

While we today know something of expensive weddings and extravagant wedding receptions, in the first century, wedding receptions were held at the house of the groom and they typically lasted for seven days! During that time the groom and the bride were not kept on display at the head table and encouraged to kiss each other when their guests clinked their glasses. Instead the bride and groom were typically off in seven days of privacy alone with each other --usually in a room built as an addition to the house by the groom himself. The wedding guests however ate and drank and danced themselves silly for a week in celebration of their friend and relations happiness together. And at this wedding in Cana, as happens with most weddings, something does not go as planned, and the wine for the party ran out.

As any hostess for a big event and especially a wedding will tell you, running out of alcohol during the reception is a huge embarrassment, and a sure fire way to kill a celebration. --All of those old petty disagreement between family

members that may seem hilarious when inebriated, suddenly seem like purposeful affronts when people start dealing with big hangovers. Mary, Jesus mother sees what is happening to the party and as a woman who cares for others, she is determined to help if she can. So she goes to Jesus and presents him with the problem with the unstated expectation that he ought do something about it.

Jesus response here is typical of a child to their mother. You can almost hear the annoyance in Jesus voice and see the rolling of his eyes. " Mom, do I have to??" This was not normally the thing that guests to a wedding celebration worried themselves about.

However, Jesus is faithful to his mother and directs the servants in what they are to do. But instead of calling for all of the empty wine skins lying around to be refilled with water, Jesus chooses instead to repurpose the stone water jars used to store the water for the ritually purifying mikvah baths. If you think about it for a minute, this in itself is pretty scandalous. Putting wine in those stone jars would be like filling a baptismal pool or font with beer. It would be something like the type of joke that you would see at a frat party. -- And this wasn't just a little bit of wine. With those six big stone jars filled up, Jesus is making 120 to 180 gallons of wine. Over 1500 lbs of liquid. Enough to completely empty your

typical home water heater three times. It was an excessive overabundant, overflowing generous amount of wine, way more than would be needed for the remaining days of the celebration.

And then we come to the most interesting detail of all. The wine that Jesus produced wasn't the cheap stuff or bad wine. It was of great quality, and it smelled and tasted wonderful. It was better wine than the best wine that they had been drinking earlier in the wedding celebration. With this sort of wine for their celebration, the party that Jesus was at would get a new burst of energy and mood. It was time to really get that party started.

So what does this mean for us today? The first thing to realize is that the way that people used to keep Sabbath with their deeply held rules for quiet and holy contemplation are completely at odds with the Jesus who we see revealed at this first miracle here at the wedding of Cana. The Jesus we see here is one to laugh at restraining and restricting religious traditions in order to have a good time celebrating with his family and friends. This miracle is one of a God who loves to give excessive amounts of good and wonderful gifts to people. A God who is not afraid to live and to laugh and to enter into real relationships with

people and to celebrate all of the joys that life on this amazing planet can bring.

We can only wonder what would happen if a church did the same thing.

It was late in 1983 when Father John Wall was assigned to the Old Patrick's Catholic Church in Chicago. But things were not going so well for the parish. The church was founded in 1846, and even though it was one of the few buildings that survived the great Chicago fire of 1870, and even though it had the distinction of being the oldest English speaking church in Chicago; the parish had suffered greatly due to changes in the neighborhood. Recent highway construction and the decline of downtown Chicago living spaces had driven people out of the neighborhood in droves. When Father Jack looked at the membership roles for his new congregation in 1983, he was dismayed to find that the official church membership list had declined down to only four families. But Father Jack had a vision. Outlining a plan he called, "Church for the Marketplace" he decided to deliberately reach out to people who were looking for purpose in life. And he especially targeted the needs of single people in their 20's and 30's.

Part of Father Jack's plan was to have the church host neighborhood block party, and in 1985, the Old St. Patricks church gave it their first try. The party featured an outdoor stage with a couple of local bands, and a ticket bought you

entrance to the concert and **four free drinks from 5:30 until 10 pm**. The money from the ticket was to be used a fundraiser for the church outreach programs in the community. And Father Jack also saw it as a way to build awareness of the ministry that the church was doing in the community.

The 1985 Old St. Pats block party was an amazing success. Over 5,000 people came and bought tickets and partied together, and many of those individuals subsequently found their way through the church doors. The World's Largest Block party became an annual "third weekend of July" event, the church continued to serve and grow, and four years later, they found themselves opening a primary school to educate neighborhood children.

Today, 28 years later, Old St. Pats is a thriving urban church. With a membership register of over 4,000 families; St. Pats averages 350 baptisms and 160 weddings a year. Their annual world's biggest block party is a celebrated and beloved Chicago tradition, and every year approximately 25,000 people descend into the two block area on Friday and Saturday nights to laugh and drink and dance and enjoy some great music.

The Worlds Largest Block party has evolved a bit over the years. Now local celebrities are recruited to be honorary bartenders, local restaurants have space

sell their specialty items and the church sells raffle tickets for a free trip to Ireland and for a year's worth of free rent in a local building. But the original **system block party system** still remains the same, a ticket to the block party includes four free drinks of your choice of beer, wine, water or soda. While the block party has grown to host two stages of music every night, with thousands of volunteers to vigilantly check ids and direct the crowds, The World's Biggest Block Party has become a great meeting place for singles, many of whom ended up dating and eventually getting married at the Old St. Pats Church.

So in conclusion, what can this mean for us today? Jesus, in the beginning of his ministry was not afraid to break tradition in order to meet the needs of the people he was with. And Old St. Pats when asking the question as to what did the single people want most to do, was not afraid to provide an evening of entertainment and libation in celebration of all of the good work that the church was doing in the community. What traditions are holding us captive here at First Presbyterian Church of Allegan? What do the people of Allegan need that we can provide, even if we at first may think that those needs have nothing to do with us? May we no longer be afraid, but love the world with all that we have and give to them what they need without regard to long standing tradition. Amen.