Something always goes wrong at weddings. It has to. It’s a rule. Something will happen that you can’t plan for and you won’t expect. It’s humans getting together to act out the sacred and something not so sacred always seems to happen.

My sister-in-law got married last October. All of the family had a part. I co-officiated the wedding with my father-in-law who also played the role of father of the bride. Cameron was the matron of honor. And our 2 eldest girls (3 and 5 years old at the time) were flower girls. They wore black leotards with pink tutus. More on that later. I don’t have decades of experience with weddings, but in my limited experience it’s a good idea to have multiple flower girls. It’s a big responsibility, after all, and they do have a tendency (divas that they are) to get a little antsy when their moment arrives. The doors open, the aisle stands dauntingly before them… and that is the moment when they either step forward or crumble in tears and run off the other direction leaving the aisle embarrassingly un-flowered. My eldest was 2 years old when my brother-in-law got married. She was to be the flower girl in that wedding too, only she ended up being carried down the aisle by her aunt Jillian who delivered her to the front row where her mom was sitting. Now, her aunt Jillian was getting married and she had a chance to do it all again. And this time it was her sister, Zetta, who refused to go down the aisle. But, Zetta would still have her big moment in the ceremony, nonetheless.

She sat with the mother of the bride (her grandmother) on the front row of the chapel during the wedding, while her sister stood up front by the bridesmaids. Zetta was invited to stand with her sister but chose the comfort of her grandmother’s lap instead. Except for one moment. During the father of the bride’s homily as he was extolling the couple on the virtues of marriage, Zetta realized she had a problem. It seems that her leotard was becoming uncomfortable. It was beginning to get wedged in uncomfortable places. And the only option, in her
mind, was to stand up and remedy the situation.

So she returned to the front of the chapel in front of the congregation to stand by her sister and the bridesmaids, as she gracefully adjusted her leotard returning it to it’s correct place. And the pews began to shake with laughter that spread from the front to the back as we all saw this little girl by the altar fixing her wedgie. When she was done, she returned to her seat. Sometimes you just have to laugh. In sacred moments sometimes we just get a glimpse of how human we are and it becomes shockingly funny. We act out this divine drama the best we know how, but our worship is like those ritual jars in Cana… sure, we can fill it with water, but the rest is out of our hands… but, if we will taste we might know God has saved the best stuff for last.

Years ago when Johnny Carson was the host of The Tonight Show he interviewed an eight year old boy. The boy was asked to come on the show because he had rescued two friends in a coal mine outside his hometown in West Virginia. As Johnny talked to the boy, it was apparent that the young man was a Christian. So Johnny asked the boy, "What are you learning in Sunday school?" The boy said, "Last week, our lesson was about when Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine." The audience roared, but Johnny tried to keep a straight face. Then he said, "And what did you learn from that story?" The boy squirmed in his chair. It was apparent he hadn't thought about this. But then he lifted up his face and said, "If you're going to have a wedding, make sure you invite Jesus!"

Jesus turning water into wine is a story that is so well known. At least, the act is well known: Jesus turned the water into wine. This story says a lot about Jesus, and give us a pretty good image of what God is like and what God wants of us and for us. Think about it— this is not just a pitcher of water that Jesus turns into wine. The abundance of this miracle is meant to show us what grace upon grace looks like. The jars for the cleansing ritual in Judaism would have held between 120 to 180 gallons of water. Let’s break down these numbers for a second:

A standard bottle of wine is 750 milliliters (ml), meaning a case of 12 bottles contains 9 liters, or
about 2.5 gallons. 150 gallons equals about 63 cases of wine. With 12 bottles per case, we have 756 bottles in total.¹ If we assume that the jars hold 180 gallons of water then we are talking about 1000 bottles of wine. That’s a lot of wine. It’s an absurd (almost hilarious) amount. It’s grace upon grace upon grace. And grace doesn’t end there in this story.

The person who is most at fault for the predicament of this wedding is the wedding steward or the master of the banquet. He is the one who would have been in charge of making sure that this situation doesn’t happen. Keep the trays of food full. Keep the band jamming. And DO NOT run out of wine. The master of the banquet is the one who is most at fault here, and it is he who gets the first taste. The first taste of this new wine goes to him. Imagine his relief. Imagine his surprise at tasting and finding out that this is the best stuff yet. And he runs to the groom in thanksgiving and relief saying, “Everyone serves the good stuff first, but you have saved the best until now.” Grace upon grace. This miracle, this moment, this epiphany reveals what God is all about. It reveals what God wants us to be about too. What’s here is grace, forgiveness and a whole ton of joy.

The Gospel of John frequently references time by saying things like “On the third day” or “After three days”. For sure, this is foreshadowing Jesus’ resurrection. But, there’s an Old Testament tie-in here too. Exodus 19 says that on the first day of the 3rd month after the Israelites had left Egypt they arrived at Mount Sinai. And they prepared for three days to receive the Covenant God would make with them (the 10 Commandments). Moses told them that after three days God would come to them. So they ceremonially washed their bodies and their clothes— perhaps even with jars similar to the ones in Cana. They were to be consecrated so that they would be ready on the third day.

And in the prophets of the Old Testament the end of time or the establishment of God’s Kingdom, on Earth as it is in heaven, is pictured as a wedding feast.

Cana is not just a sign of things to come. It is a sign of what we should be doing now. Preparing ourselves for the feast by feasting upon the grace, forgiveness and
joy we know now. Our jars may seem only to contain water… our ritual seems to be just words until moments of transcendence where we see through the present into the eternal. And when life is perceived through the lens of faith in that way we can experience the kind of deep joy that embraces pain and suffering so that it can be transformed.

Have you ever seen laughter transform a moment? The great theologian Karl Barth once said, “Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God.” Anne Lamott once wrote that “Laughter is carbonated holiness.” Carolyn Arends says, “Laughter is the Elmer’s Glue that attaches us to the goodness that inhabits this world, and to the gladness that hints at the world to come.” Laughter is joy bubbling up from the depths. And it sustains us in this life… it has a way of reminding us of what’s important. It unites, it breaks down barriers between us and them, it opens us see things in new ways… laughter does all this… it just might be the Spirit of God’s favorite tool.

Laughter is the expression of the joy deep within us; and it’s the way that joy connects with others.

We don’t hear of Jesus laughing in this story; though his interaction with his mother here is funny to many of us with mothers prone to make brazen assumptions like this. Jesus is portrayed as a man of great joy throughout the gospels. We see him eating and drinking with his friends and sometimes even those who wish him harm. The gospels don’t record laughs, but they're there between the lines if we look hard enough. Surely, there was a smile on the steward’s face as he tasted that wine the servants brought him. There’s something about Jesus, by the grace of the Spirit, there’s something about him that drew people in. The depth of his teaching. Yes. The genuine way he spoke to people. Yes. Perhaps, also his grasp of religious irony. His storytelling depicted the humor and tragedy of the human predicament. All these things are what drew Jesus’ disciples to him.

There’s a place for reverence in following Jesus, but we are followers of the One who announced the Kingdom eating and drinking. He said do this in remembrance of me— as in, when you gather at tables remember me. Remember the joy that I bring to life. There’s something about
eating together that invites an intimacy that reflects the grace of God’s presence. After all, whenever we eat or drink we are taking in that which God has given us in order that we can sustain the life that he has given us. So each meal is a feast of life. Each meal is an act of grace. Which is why baptists eat every chance we get. You know the old joke: When the class was asked to bring something to share a little bit about who they are (they’re family heritage) the catholic kid brought a rosary, the episcopalian kid brought his grandfather’s tattered Book of Common Prayer, and the baptist kid brought a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Every denomination, every church has a joke similar to that one. There’s the Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic, and Presbyterian version. Because we all sense the importance of the feast. We all know that at the table together joy is discovered.

Religious life is stereotyped as bitter, boring, and dull. Maybe it’s because pastors like me have tried to be entertainers instead of docents of God’s kingdom. We won’t ever be Netflix or Cirque de Soleil. That’s not the role of the church. We can be engaging; we can offer ritual and music that helps us all make sense of our life with God. But, we forsake our mission when we seek simply to entertain.

Cana reminds us God saves the best for last. Our faith should look forward in joy, rather than longing for a day gone by. God saves the best for last… so just when we think we’ve run dry we’ve arrived at the moment of transformation. Faith doesn’t keep us from harm or suffering. It doesn’t mean we will always be happy. It does offer joy. It offers the opportunity to be plugged into the source of joy that sustains all of creation. That’s a joy that bubbles up in unexpected ways, sometimes even in church making pews shake with suppressed laughter. That’s when water becomes wine, and the spirit of God brings new dimensions to what we thought was just the same old thing.

I heard an interview recently with the actor Martin Sheen. Sheen is a devout Christian and he was talking about how he returned to faith. He grew up in the church. But, as an adult he drifted away as his career picked up.

Martin said between Apocalypse Now and Gandhi he went through
about four years of reflection, and alcohol abuse, insecurity, anger, resentment, and a near breakup with his family. He says, he was searching for that elusive thing that all of us search for. Most of the time we’re not even conscious of it, but we’re searching for ourselves in an authentic way. We want to recognize the person we see in the mirror, and embrace that person with all the brokenness and lackluster, all the things that only we are aware of in the depths of our being. The turning point for him was getting out of his head and seeing the world. Martin saw extreme poverty up-close and personal in India while shooting the movie Gandhi.

Just after that he went to Paris. And he wondered in to a little church there. It just happened to be the only English speaking church in France. He wondered in and wondered up to the table for communion— wondering back to himself, back home. What had been empty jars of ritual was changed for him. He was changed. Martin says, “It was the single most joyful moment of my life.” It was a homecoming, but it was different. He was different and he understood his home, his church differently. He says, “I was afraid to come back to the piety of my youth. I wanted the sacraments. I wanted the community, but I didn’t want to feel like... God was watching me and looking for me to make a mistake.”

What Martin discovered, and what we discover too, in places like Cana (at feasts with beloved communities) is that God isn’t waiting on us to make a mistake. Look at the steward of the feast in Cana— the one who messed up gets the first sip. We are humans acting out the sacred, searching to expose more of the image of God within us and sometimes we look funny as we do; like a boy in his dad’s suit or a little girl in a wedding trying to get her leotard right. Joy is waiting, even in those moments. God is waiting for us at the table, in communities, in places where we can be shown that we are loved. And the realization of that love is the foundation of joy that transforms everything within us. That is the grace upon grace that we discover in the feast of God’s kingdom. The feast we prepare for now, by feasting and welcoming others to our tables. We sing. We pray. We talk. We tell the story of God and God’s people, and in doing all that we find that God has saved the best for last.