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“Wedding Parties”
Epiphany 2C: John 2:1-11
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The artist Tintoretto has a famous work called *The Wedding Feast at Cana*. His Renaissance painting of our Galilean story is set in Venice and has Jesus at table surrounded by all the characters you’d expect: Jesus, his mother, disciples, partygoers-- even the six stone water jars for purification. But what really marks this picture, is the way it frames this story of first Jesus’ first sign in John. Behind Jesus’ head, accenting Jesus’ presence at the feast, is an arched, open window. Tintoretto’s painting of the sign story scene, you see, really is a window to Jesus. The painting, like the story of Jesus first sign, is a window framing who he is. The story picture is a sign of his identity.

And what does this particular window show about Jesus? Jesus comes to a feast bringing grace upon grace. He appears surprisingly to offer abundant grace—just as the wine is running out. Karoline Lewis in her commentary says the story in Cana only underlines grace.¹ The wedding itself begins on the third day--resurrection language for new life coming. Jesus and disciples had been invited to the days’ long village feast in Cana. This was no private wedding—it was a Galilean village party with Jesus was an ordinary guest. At some point in the festivities, the wine goes out—a potential source of embarrassment for a family in a village. Jesus’ mother is present and says laconically: “They have no wine.” You know how it is—sometimes mothers tell you what really is, so you can get doing what really needs to get done. Jesus is a little brusque in return. He worries it’s not time for this first sign—Jesus’ hour, his death, resurrection and ascension are for later, not here in a Cana village wedding feast. But Jesus’ mother, well, she persisted. She tells some servants to do whatever Jesus says. Here’s where the six stone water jars used for Jewish rites of purification come in. Jesus tells

the servants to fill them. Once done, he has the servants draw the water out, but before they can bring it to the wedding party planner, the water has become wine—and it wasn't the cheap stuff, but truly fine wine. The wedding planner marveled—most people serve the good stuff first and then bring out the cheap stuff after the party really gets going. But you have saved the best for last. And there it is again—this third day wedding is about resurrection new life. The text doesn't actually use the word grace for this party, but Dr. Lewis testifies to its presence. She notes that in John chapter 1, it says: “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth.... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” Chapter 2's story is just the first sign of the abundant grace that Jesus Christ will be revealing. He reveals his glory even now in surprising, ordinary ways and the disciples believe. Abundant grace. It's John's first sign in a Galilean Jewish village, a window to who Jesus is. Quite a picture!

Yet as nice as it is, there's one thing in the picture that Gentile Christians like most of us have stumbled over. One detail in the Cana wedding story that keeps tripping us up: those six stone water jars for Jewish purification. For all the power of this picture of surprising, mysterious grace in ordinary life as Jesus' first sign, those six stone-jars have made Christians stumble. We would do so here if we turn the six stone water jars into a Jewish problem. For centuries, Christians have run with this detail to say something like this: Judaism was legalistic, just like those jars for purification; but Jesus comes to liven things up! The Jewish stone jars for purification become a visual foil for the wine of God's grace. It's an easy mistake to make. John does talk about the Jews in pretty brusque ways through the 21 chapters of his gospel—true enough. But Jesus is not Gentile, he is a Jew—his identity is *Jewish*. And the idea that *these six stone water jars are there solely to do anti-Jewish work, just doesn't hold water!* Literally! University of Ottawa New Testament scholar Adele Reinhartz points out that the six jars needed to be filled; *they were already empty.*² This rip-roaring wedding feast *got started* with purification rites. How else do we know? Prof. Reinhartz says there were *six, large* stone water jars for purification—

count ‘em, six. Six meant somebody made someone made some pretty big party plans before the thing even got started. We Gentile Christians shouldn’t be party poopers, nor should we use a derogatory Jewish identity to pretty up a Gentile Christian one. The picture is a Jewish one and boy, is it gracious. The abundance of Christ’s grace in ordinary life is a surpassing one: Six large stone jars need filling because people have washed already for dinner and *so many have been invited to the feast*. The sign story is a Jewish window to Jesus’ identity at this amazing grace-filled sign at a wedding in Cana.

So how about us? We are not Jewish Galileans drinking our fill at a wedding at Cana. We’re not even the sixteenth century Venice folk who show up in Tintoretto’s painting. But sometimes, sometimes when you look at a picture of someone else, you see at least something different about yourself. It’s like looking at a framed picture on the wall, only to realize that the class covering of the picture is reflecting your own image, too. We don’t have to make Jewish Jesus less Jesus to connect with him. We can instead see him for who he is and marvel at the surprising solidarity this ancient Jewish wedding feast can also inspire in us. You see, it’s important not just because they are not us, but because we ourselves commune across differences. The congregation of Lutheran Church of the Redeemer is not just a collection of cantankerous Swedes anymore. For one thing, I guess I’m a cantankerous Dane! But in truth, we are comprised of several identities: we were not all raised Lutheran, or even Scandinavian. Some of us are also Jewish, Indian, Nepalese, Canadian, Belgian-Flemish, and Italian, too. When we share the peace on Sunday morning—and boy, do we love to share the peace, we bear witness to a little bit of new life among God’s people, a first sign of unity in difference that is a little more than just friendliness: it’s communion. It’s not always easy, and there are and will be cultural struggles along the way, but we are fueled by an ample grace that keeps calling us to the Lord’s Table together. We celebrate this weekend the life-giving memory of Martin Luther King, Jr., who among other things supported Black students’ lunch counter sit ins in the face of white supremacy and in the struggle against

oppression. The lunch counter sit ins presaged a resurrection feast that eventually led to others joining the struggle for racial justice: even some White Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Unitarians, too!

So, what do we do as we reflect on this new window to ourselves? Sunday morning remains the most segregated hour in America. And, well, the Lutheran Church remains America's whitest Protestant church—true enough, but we know firsthand that God's grace is even now helping us to share blessings of peace as we are drawn to the Table. This abundant grace is not about conforming to something different than we are, but living more deeply into our differences as communion. The crazy quilt fabric of our lives at Redeemer is beginning to be our own witness to the abundant life of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. We of all people are learning bit by bit that to be Christian is not to define ourselves against someone else, but to risk deeper connection across as the love of God in all of its abundance becomes manifest. But I'm just saying what you already know in your hearts. Here at Redeemer Church the death of Madukher Pandey has inspired us all to show solidarity with him and his family in their grief. We have and are even now reaching out in ways that connect our differences in Christian solidarity. But it is just as true that this connection has moved both ways. Madukher grew up in Nepal and shared his culture with his person, his life, and his commitments to us. He never stopped being Madukher or Nepalese, but remained who he was in loving solidarity. Grace by faith remains our witness, but its embodiment in our lives pushes us beyond to a risky communion. Our reflection is different, but has deepened who we are: a people learning to connect, even in fits and starts, across difference. And now we ourselves are living into the first sign that showed Jesus' identity in a Jewish wedding feast of grace in Cana.

Oh. One more thing: do you remember the painting? The one with the big arched window behind Jesus' head? With Tintoretto, we know, the window opens up to show who Jesus is. And the window, behind Jesus' head—well, it's full of people. This Jesus, well, he's himself a sign. The text is a window to him—to be sure, but even now this window opens up to all of us, too.

¹ This interpretation of the first sign story is based largely on Karoline Lewis' commentary from the *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary Series, John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 35-39.

² Adele Reinhartz, "John" (Annotations), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds.; 2nd. Ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 178, n. 6.