

June 24, 2018
John 2:1-12
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
Mary E. Baard

Wedding Wine

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Today's story of the wedding at Cana comes to us from the gospel of John. A century ago, in a written examination for a religious studies class at Oxford University the students were told to *write about the religious and spiritual meaning in the miracle of Christ turning water into wine.* Most of the students spent the two hours filling their examination booklets. As the end of their time drew near, there was one student who had still written nothing. The proctor came over to him and insisted he write something. *The young Lord Byron simply picked up his hand and penned the following line:*

"The water met its Master, and blushed."
(*Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart.*)

SERMON

'Tis the season of weddings and anniversaries. This week, Ron and Elaine Kurtz celebrated their 64th anniversary. Two weeks ago was Fred and Bonnie Dickey's 62nd Anniversary. Yesterday Carol O'Donnell and Mike Smith were married here in the sanctuary. Five years ago, many of us gathered here to celebrate the official wedding of Ray and David who have been together over 35 years. Congratulations to all those celebrating anniversaries.

Lord Byron's class was focused on the miracle of water changing to wine. Today, I'd like us to focus on the miracle of two people joining their lives together.

We live in a time of significant change in marriage patterns. So, it's appropriate to ask ourselves - What is marriage for? Some time ago, I asked that question of a parenting group and after about twenty minutes of conversation one of the men commented, *Did you notice we didn't answer your question?* I had noticed. The more you think about it the more there is to consider.

There was a time when having children would have been at the top of the list of what marriage is for. Today we live in a time when people have the freedom – biologically and sociologically – to choose whether or not to have children. Nothing has changed human life more in the last century than the development of reliable birth control and fertility treatments. Yet, I still find that most young couples I marry have chosen to get married at that particular time because they have decided to have children.

Societies support marriage to support children. We know that children do better when they are cared for in a healthy intimate family setting. We know this. We know this deeply from our own experiences – both positive and negative – as children and as parents. That is why taking children away from their parents is fraught with danger, even if those parents are caught in political and economic turmoil and cross international borders illegally.

This past week we have heard a bipartisan outcry – *What about the children?* The practices of the immigration officials may be legal, but it is not just. There are laws and there is justice. When the two are in conflict our faith calls us to justice. Next week we'll look specifically at Romans 13 and its comments about "being subject to governing authorities."

From the state's perspective, marriage is a legal arrangement, as signified by a marriage license. In effect the two people form a small business together. I read once that a marriage license covers about eighty separate laws. In a legal marriage people experience both the protective advantages and the vulnerabilities of the state's decisions about their relationship.

For much of human history official marriages have been for those who owned property. Everyone else was left to figure out their own familial arrangements. It didn't matter if you didn't have money. Marriage decisions were determined by the head of the household and generally were designed to increase the family's wealth or status or was an attempt to broker peace between competing tribes. The feelings of the bride and groom were not the primary consideration.

In today's story of the wedding at Cana, the size of the celebration indicates that these were probably people of means. Likely the bride and groom did not even meet before the ceremony. The financial arrangements were made between the families and then love came later, if you were lucky.

A number of years ago, I met a woman who was lucky in her arranged marriage. She and her husband each trusted their parents to make a good selection and it worked out well. They had been married for more than thirty years and were happy together.

Those of us who live in self-selected marriages might be interested to know that studies show that marriages from arranged-marriage cultures have about the same level of success (satisfaction).

The church is concerned about children and about the economic realities of couples, but the church is also concerned about the spiritual well being and commitment of the two people in a marriage. Marriage is a spiritual journey in which each person is an intimate witness to the other's life. This awareness of the church has grown over time.

In the early centuries of the Christian church, the church pretty much left marriage up to secular traditions. Likely this was because Jesus said very little about marriage and because the Apostle Paul's recommendation to the followers of Jesus was celibacy. That recommendation didn't really take hold.

In those early centuries, a priest might come to your house and say a blessing as a favor, if you asked. It wasn't until the 8th century that the church became more involved in marriage rules and practices.

Along the way, one of the good things about the church getting involved was when it began to insist, in the interest of justice, that women should not be coerced into marrying someone against her will.

Marriage is a spiritual journey that calls for the deepest commitments of love. It is an intimate relationship in which to express romance and sexuality but also to commit to each other's well-being. Each person's spirit matters.

At yesterday's wedding, we read 1 Corinthians 13, Paul's encouragement to a congregation to live in love.

Love that is patient and kind.

Love is not jealous or boastful.

It is not arrogant or rude.

Over time, we have realized this is good advice for a marriage also.

I've been thinking that our First Parish Church covenant

To do justice

To love kindness

To walk humbly with God

Is also good advice for a marriage.

To do justice.

Each person needs to do justice to the other's spirit. You can't change another person. However, along the way, in a just relationship, you may find yourself changing.

To love kindness.

Never underestimate the power of kindness. The little chances to love.

To walk humbly with God

Marriage brings us challenges we never expect. Sometimes along life's journey it feels like the party is over, the wine has run out. No person and no couple can make it alone. We need the blessing of God's presence in our lives and in our marriages. May Christ's wedding wine bless you and those you love.