

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

January 19, 2025

Essential Celebration

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Just a quick reminder, since we find ourselves rather early on in John's Gospel this morning, that one of the key's to interpreting John is to view it through the lens of its Prologue.¹ And for the miracles in John's Gospel, you won't go too far wrong in your interpretation if you look to verse 16 of the prologue in particular: "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."²

What does grace upon grace look like? It looks like an overabundance of exceptional wine, just when you've run out. It's the water of life freely offered to a foreign woman of poor reputation.³ It's healing at a word rather than ritual and tradition; healing even over Sabbath rules.⁴ It's turning five loaves and two fish into a feast for thousands.⁵ Grace upon grace is always more than we expect, and certainly more than we deserve!

But beyond the example of grace upon grace, I want to explore another aspect of our readings this morning. And that is the necessity of celebration. The need we humans have for joy and delight.

I must confess, this topic does not come naturally or easily to me. I tend to be a rather serious person. And my profession exacerbates that. Sure, weddings and baptisms are joyous occasions; but illnesses and death can easily dominate the life of a community of faith. This mostly means that I, and our community of faith, need to be intentional about being unserious at times.

¹ John 1:1-18

² John 1:16 (NRSVUE)

³ John 3

⁴ John 5

⁵ John 6

Finding reasons for joy and delight; discovering things we can celebrate about one another and our life together.

I don't raise this topic simply because I need to be reminded of it (though that is a part of the why of this sermon). I raise it mostly because it's all over our readings today! Isaiah speaks of Israel's vindication: "You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her and your land Married, for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married."⁶ The Psalmist praises God's steadfast love, the love that welcomes people to take refuge in God, to "feast on the abundance of [God's] house," and "drink from the river of [God's] delights."⁷

Our epistle reading has less obvious delight, but the appointed text from 1 Corinthians does speak of the necessity of community. We are reminded that our gifts come from the same Spirit and that we are encouraged to use them for the common good. Then along comes our reading from John about Jesus using his gifts for the common good...exercising divine power as an expression of God's grace upon grace.

God takes delight in us! God invites us to take delight in one another! But wow can celebrations be work! Imagine the effort that went into that wedding at Cana: considerable planning and effort was required, physical, mental, and emotional energy was expended, as well as a substantial investment of money and resources. Then the wine runs out! What a let down! And, at least at first, Jesus seems indifferent: "Woman, what concern is that to me and to you? My hour has not yet come."⁸

This isn't exactly Jesus' problem, is it? A reasonable inference is that he is a guest after all, not one responsible for the party and its planning. And why should Jesus risk exposing himself at this point? "My hour has not yet come" suggests that the timing is not quite right. But he relents, Jesus seems to conclude that the celebration is worth the risk. The wellbeing of the community's celebration is something he will prioritize.

⁶ Isaiah 62:4

⁷ Psalm 36:7-8

⁸ John 2:4b

Why? Why does Jesus relent? Why do we hear so often in the Hebrew Bible that God takes delight in humanity? Perhaps, like is so often the case in scripture, God is inviting us into a practice that is good for us. Much like our need for rest led to God giving us the gift of Sabbath. I don't wonder if God knows how much we need joy and delight, and so God invites us into celebration.

Think of how many examples of God's kingdom in scripture involve a celebration! Isaiah 25 describes God's promised future as a feast. The final chapters of Revelation speak of the joy and glory of God's presence. Over and over in both Testaments we hear God described as a groom and God's chosen as the bride. Of course, this describes a particular sort of relationship, but it also evokes images of wedding celebrations too!

Jesus uses his gifts on behalf of the joy and delight of the community. He also invites others to join him in this celebratory work. Mary has to see the needs and carefully draw attention to it. The servants are required to fill the large clay jars with over 120 gallons of water. The headwaiter must sample and give his approval, verifying the quality of what Jesus has provided. There's a lot of work involved, most of it communal; people using their gifts and God's blessing to ensure celebration occurs, to ensure the community knows joy and delight.

As I mentioned previously, this doesn't come easily to me. Which is why I need community, the gifts of others. Especially the gifts of those for whom joy and delight do come easier. I need to be reminded of the importance of celebration. Reminded that we can experience, in the here-and-now, a foretaste of the feast to come. The joyous feast, the feast of celebration.

In difficult times in particular, we need to remember joy and delight. We need to find reasons to celebrate. Alice Walker reminds us of this in the book, *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing*: "Though we have all encountered our share of grief and troubles, we can still hold the line of beauty, form, and beat — no small accomplishment in a world as challenging as this one. Hard times require furious dancing. Each of us is the proof."

There are dark times ahead, and difficult work too. But we are not alone in it. And we have reason to celebrate. We have been invited to take joy and delight in one another, in creation, and in God. We have been given all sorts of gifts and opportunities for community. Let's use them...let's take delight in them...let's celebrate them! Amen.