When you least expect it… A sermon in response to John 2:1-11 by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, January 20, 2019. (Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.)

Today’s Gospel lesson is a nice story, isn’t it? :: “Jesus’ first miracle…” – or sign, as John calls them. “Turning water to wine…” +++ It seems like a nice way to … ease … into a Gospel that’s full of tension and suspense, doesn’t it? … But, there’s really a whole lot more going on in this short passage than we might notice at first – and I think when we put it all together, we see that it’s a perfect beginning to Jesus’ work as a teacher, as the Messiah, and the Son of God. +++ So, I’d like to walk through the Wedding at Cana this morning – notice with you some of the things that are happening at that party – and see what it has to say about three things in particular:: First, what does the Wedding at Cana tell us about God’s engagement in our lives, especially when we LEAST EXPECT IT; Second, Here at the beginning of John, how does the passage orient us to who Jesus really is and his mission here, among us?; and, finally, Third, what does all of this really mean for us – in our lives – here in the 21st century?

What does the Wedding at Cana tell us about God’s engagement in our lives? :: One of the first things we notice in the passage is Jesus’ reluctance to get involved at all. We’re used to him always stepping in to solve whatever problems arise, ((that’s sort of his “thing,” isn’t it??)). … So, it throws us a little off balance when Jesus’ mother says to him, “They have no wine,” and he responds with, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” before he finally relents and saves the party. +++ If you think about it, that’s like a theme we see pop up often in the stories of our day, in movies and television:: when someone faces a big problem and goes to another person for help – a good and capable person that we know could be a huge help, – in fact, they could probably solve everything – if only the character could get them to stop whatever else they’re doing… and pay attention,… to take it seriously…, and make them care about the problem… We see this time after time in the Harry Potter books, for example, as Harry tries to get adults to see things from his perspective – and to be brave. We even see it in the second Men in Black movie, as Will Smith’s Agent J tries to convince Agent K (played by Tommy Lee Jones) to start fighting aliens again after he’s had his memory wiped. +++ One of my favorites is in the Movie True Grit, (I prefer the original with John Wayne). Mattie, a young woman who witnessed her father’s murder, tries to hire Marshal Rooster Cogburn to track down the murderer. The Marshal is a gruff but good man – but she can’t get him to stop and listen to her. Then, even Mattie does get his attention, he dismisses her, saying, “Why don’t you go home and leave me alone. Your mother will need help with the churning.” +++ But she is persistent and refuses to leave him alone. Finally, the Marshal recognizes that Mattie is in pain and needs someone to listen to her – to take her seriously after the loss of her father. So, he softens, and says, “I don’t think you’ve got $50 but if you’re hungry I’ll take you home and give you supper. We can talk it over…” +++ And so, after initially rebuffing her, his compassion draws him in, …to be Mattie’s champion… in a quest that had nothing to do with him. +++ As viewers, we immediately see that the Marshal is committed to her and will keep his word… But, she isn’t so sure. Every time Marshal Cogburn gets out of her sight, Mattie assumes that he has forgotten about her or abandoned her until, when she LEAST EXPECTS IT, from a distance, she sees him… charging alone… against a gang of four outlaw horsemen – to save her – in the climactic scene of the movie. +++ Then, once he has offered his own life for her sake, it finally sinks in to Mattie that he’s committed to her – that she can rely on him – that finally, there is someone she can trust again.

+++ A story that started out with a disagreeable conversation over a meal ends with a relationship of mutual trust and respect that will last the rest of their lives.

That’s what seems to be happening here at the wedding party, isn’t it? Jesus doesn’t come right out and refuse to help, but that’s definitely the impression we get when he says, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” Then, it’s interesting that his mother persists, as though she fully expects him to do something anyway – like he hadn’t even said that. +++ And Jesus listens to her – maybe he takes a few moments to realize how humiliated the hosts will be – it might seem trivial but it was anything but trivial to them. The family would lose status and respect in the community… And, they couldn’t just send someone out to the store for more wine like we can now. No one has any expectation that anything could be done to save the evening. +++ But Jesus helps, when it is least expected. +++ Behind the scenes. +++ Only the servants knew where this new wine came
from – this wine that was better than the first servings had been. The chief steward didn’t even know what Jesus had done. The hosts – the guests… they all benefitted, but they never knew.

Jesus knew why he was here. He had a world to win, he had debates and battles ahead of him, and a great sacrifice to make. But his compassion draws him into this problem that has nothing to do with him. And it happens time after time, with almost everyone he meets, Jesus is drawn into people’s personal problems – their illnesses – blindness – possession by demons – hunger – and even death. And he becomes their champion. +++ It’s easy to think of God as remote from us – somewhere else – on other business more important than ours. But here at this simple social occasion – this party - we see that God’s focus, time, and power are engaged with us here… now. Christ is affected by our needs – by our prayers – and by our pleas – and he responds!

Our second question is: “how does the passage orient us to who Jesus really is and his mission here among us?” +++ I mentioned before that there’s a lot more going on in this passage than we might notice at first – and I think it’s helpful to put some of those pieces together, to help us see the whole picture of why it’s so fitting that Jesus’ work begins here – at this wedding. +++ In the Old Testament, weddings often symbolize the coming of the Messiah, for example, the Prophet Isaiah wrote, “For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” +++ And this symbolism continued into the other gospels, with Matthew, Mark and Luke depicting Christ as the bridegroom in a wedding with God’s people in the coming kingdom. +++ Also, the prophets often referred to the arrival of the Messiah, who would restore Israel, as a time of abundant wine: like Amos, who wrote, “The time is surely coming, says the Lord, when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it.” +++ In this light, we can see the steward’s cry, “you have saved the good wine until now” as a proclamation of the arrival of the Messiah – the arrival of the Kingdom of God – in Jesus Christ, at the wedding party. +++ And did you notice what empty containers – sitting unused in the house – Jesus used to make his New Wine? They were “six stone water jars used for the Jewish rites of purification – each holding twenty or thirty gallons.” … Jars for Jewish rites of purification… just sitting there… unused… empty… +++ With the arrival of the Messiah, the traditional rites of purification have run dry. +++ Jesus Christ has come to renew the jars with up to 180 gallons of Good Wine – wine that will come to symbolize the gift of his own blood to save us. +++ Jesus refills those old empty jugs this new kind of purification – better – fresher than the old, to purify and feed God’s people. +++ As Jesus himself says in Mark, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast.” +++ The Wedding at Cana does more than provide the narrative of Jesus’ first sign in the Gospel of John. It announces the arrival of the messianic age in Jesus Christ, and we CAN expect everything to change, now that he is on the scene.

Finally, our third question is, what does all of this really mean for us – in our lives – here in the 21st century? I think there are several answers to that question – depending on whom we identify with in the story. +++ THE HOST never even learned that he hadn’t properly prepared for the party. And, he hadn’t used his purification jars in so long, he didn’t even notice they had run dry. But Christ stepped into his life that night and blessed him anyway when he least expected it. Jesus saved the party – poured out a new kind of eternal purification – and ensured that everyone went away satisfied. +++ Do we include Christ in our plans? +++ Do you neglect your spiritual life until you are bone-dry before asking him to refill you? +++ Do you pay enough attention to notice when he’s at work on you? +++ THE GUESTS certainly benefit, don’t they? :: drinking the New, Good, Wine of the Messiah – but they never even know that the old wine had run out – they just keep drinking and having a good time. +++ Are we paying enough attention to see what God is doing for us – behind the scenes – every day, even when we least expect it? … Or, are we so busy enjoying the party that we don’t even notice the Holy Spirit working in our lives – refilling us with love, relationships, and the many blessings of creation? +++ What blessings are all around you in your life that you’ve forgotten are given to you by God? +++ THE SERVANTS do what Christ tells them to do, drawing all that water to fill the jugs. They know where the wine came from because they saw Jesus change it. It’s not really clear what they do with that knowledge, though – They don’t seem to understand what they are witnessing. Are they brought to faith by what they saw? Do they tell their stories about the mysterious wedding
guest? +++ +++ … Do we tell our stories of Jesus out there – beyond these walls? What do we do with the mysteries of God that we wrestle with but don’t understand? Do we talk about them – pray about them? Do we allow them to change us? Are you ready to hear God’s call on your life and respond – even if you don’t completely understand where it’s leading you? +++ +++ THE DISCIPLES are in the story too, aren’t they? They come to the party – and they watch everything that’s happening. They seem to be the only ones that connect the dots and see that Christ reveals his glory that night, with this first sign – ((apparently earlier than he had intended to)). And how do they respond? :: “His disciples believed in him.”… +++ Do we keep our eyes trained on Christ – through the excitement of our lives – the wedding parties – the stormy weather – even when we least expect it? +++ Do you notice the signs of God’s presence running through every part of your life – and respond by believing – and following ever more closely?

May we all stop to recognize the signs of God that are all around us – the gifts and blessings that greet us every day. +++ May we stop accepting miracle upon miracle as casually as guests at a wedding party accept a glass of wine – without really noticing and appreciating what the Lord is doing. +++ May we connect the dots and see that Christ reveals his glory all around us – and may it bring us to believe in him even more deeply – and enjoy him – forever… Even when we least expect it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.