

A wedding reception that felt like Cana

We drank wine, danced with abandon, and caught a glimpse of grace.

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [August 28, 2019](#) issue



The wedding was extraordinary. Or perhaps better, it was a grace. Or perhaps better yet, the extraordinary evening was another glimpse into God’s grace for our lives.

My stepson, who has been a cherished part of my life since he was a little boy, was married last June in our seminary chapel. The wedding was above all a worship service—tender, elegant, and focused on the grace of God. But it was also a huge party. It is only as a father that I’ve come to understand the holiness of both the worship and the party.

After a stunning tenor solo from the bride’s father that left us breathless, the bride and groom faced each other to take their vows. I have officiated at a lot of weddings, but I am still amazed by this moment when flawed young adults, nurtured in love by their even more flawed parents, make vows to be bound together for the rest of their lives. They have no idea what their future holds, no clue about who they will be

in 50 or even ten years, nor can they imagine the wounds they will give each other along the way. They're dependent on the grace of God if their marriage is to survive, and even more so if it does not.

But when it's your child at the altar it is all the more extraordinary to watch as he casts himself more fully upon the grace of God than he could possibly understand. I had the same sense of amazement when I watched my daughter make this same holy vow 12 years ago. She had somehow survived her parents' divorce, as had my stepson. The most important people in their lives had failed at the very promise they were now making. So they knew the stakes were high. But our failures could not diminish their yearning to live out of a vow.

Like so many couples before them, they took each other's hands and vowed, "I will always be loving and faithful to you." How can they make such a claim? Only by counting on the grace of God that will be more faithful to them than they can be to each other. Both of them are preacher's kids, raised in churches that proclaim God's grace every Sunday. They understand grace. But when you're 22, you haven't had enough time to discover how desperately you're going to need it.

No one wants to think about this at a wedding, however. Ironically, nobody even wants to think about marriage on this special day. What we want is an experience of abundant joy. And sometimes the same grace of God, which is ready to carry us through the deepest of dark valleys, can also give us sheer delight. It's not promised, and it certainly doesn't depict the depths of God's grace in our lives, but there are fleeting moments when by grace we get to have a party.

The weather was perfect for the outdoor reception under the white, peaked tent in our backyard that evening. The food, wine, and laughter were plentiful, and the dancing—even among the older folks—was with abandon.

I couldn't help thinking about the wedding at Cana, where Jesus performed his first miracle by giving a lot of really good wine to people who had already had so much that they ran out of it. So the first miracle of Jesus was to celebrate, honor, and extend one of the fleeting glimpses our very flawed humanity gets at experiencing exultation, laughter, and the freedom to dance.

Ninety-nine percent of life is not like this. Mostly we are just trying to meet our responsibilities with as much faithfulness as our tattered and worn-down lives can muster. Or we're recovering from our failures and the failures of others to do what

was expected. This is actually how the heroism of life is found—where ordinary people choose to live faithfully, honorably, graciously, witnessing to the salvation of Jesus Christ in a world that is mostly not loving.

But once in a great while comes a moment when all of that faithful spiritual heroism can be set aside, and you can witness the vows of a young couple who still believe in the “until death do us part” kind of love. Before long you’re kicking back at a wedding reception, laughing with old friends while watching your child lit up with love.

As a pastor, I’ve always knocked myself out to convince couples in premarital counseling that it’s not about the wedding—it’s about the marriage. And I have often rolled my eyes at all of the production that gets woven into weddings. But having been through a couple of weddings as a parent, I have to say that I understand now why there is so much fuss over the dresses, caterer, music, photographer, flowers, DJ, and even the deluxe portable toilets.

We’re in awe that another young couple is going to stand before God and a congregation to make a vow to be always loving. But the emergence of another vow before God is too precious and holy to discuss. So at weddings what we talk about is anything that makes us laugh, toast, tear up, want to dance, or delight in the perseverance of love.

There is even grace for that. It is as if the Savior says again, “OK, take a break from struggling to live up to your many commitments, and have another glass of wine.” Cana keeps showing up.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “A glimpse of Cana.”