

Sermon on John 2:1-11
Martin Luther King Sunday, January 17, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Some of you may know that my wife Kim and I like to cook. We love to prepare food for our extended family (which can be anywhere from 20-30 people) on those “high holy days” - like Friday, Saturday, Sunday or various holidays. Our idea of a good time is to invite our extended family and friends to our home to eat, and we always want to have enough. My sister in law often thinks that we cook too much, because there always seems to be something left over, that we eat the next day. I guess our kids think so, too! But we wouldn’t want to run out of food! We would never want anyone to say, there’s not enough food! That somehow we ran out! It would be unthinkable! Can any of you relate to this?

I guess that’s what happened in the gospel lesson today. It’s a passage from John, full of symbolism (as usual!). After Jesus called his first disciples along the Sea of Galilee, John says that “on the third day there was a wedding in Cana.” Jesus’ mother Mary was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited. So they were all there, celebrating with the bride and groom, family and friends. And then the unthinkable happened. The wine gave out.

Now, have any of you been the hosts at an important function, a wedding or anniversary, where you wanted everything to go perfectly? Did anything go wrong? If it did, you would be “mortified”. You may have dreaded the worst, but if all went well, you rejoiced when everyone had enough, and you never ran out of food or drink. It wouldn’t be right to run out of food or wine; it would be too embarrassing! But on this day, it happened, the worst thing occurred. The wine ran out, and the servants and steward scurried about, wondering what to do. Jesus’ mother, Mary, found out, and told her son. “They have no wine.” Was she sympathetic for the host family, wanting to help so that the family would not be embarrassed? Or did she think that this was time to go? Why did she tell Jesus?

Jesus had his answer: he told his mother, “Woman, what has this to do with you and me?” Seems kind of harsh, to me! Wasn’t Jesus going to fix this? But he said, “My hour has not yet come.” In other words, it’s not time for me, yet! But then his mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you!” Now the pressure was on! His mother had told them to obey, because Jesus was going to do something important to save the situation. And so they did.

Jesus then went into action. He told the servants to take six jars, that held 20-30 gallons of water for purification rituals, and fill them with water. Then they took them to the steward (the headwaiter). When the steward tasted it, he found that it had become the finest wine, better than any wine that had been served yet at

the wedding banquet. The steward didn't know that Jesus had anything to do with it, so he credited the hosts, and said "Most people serve the good wine first, and bring out the inferior wine after everyone has had their fill. But these hosts have saved the best wine for last!" This was the first of the signs that Jesus did, revealing that he was the Messiah, John says. And his disciples believed in him.

This is kind of a strange story. Why is this story so significant in Jesus' ministry that the church still remembers it and tells of it today? Was it an act of "magic" that Jesus performed, turning water into wine, that impressed his disciples and any other witnesses? I don't think so. In John, the miracles of Jesus always had a deeper, more symbolic meaning. That these jars of water were originally used for purification, ritually cleansing people's hands and feet before eating, is key to the story's meaning. Jesus took these jars of water, and changed them into wine. He had transformed water for the rite of purification, into what would later become the wine used in the sacrament of holy communion, in which those who believe in him eat his body and drink his blood, by eating bread and drinking wine. The miracle at this wedding foreshadowed Jesus' death and resurrection, a hint of the greater meaning that we bring to our celebration of the holy eucharist.

These days, when so much is happening in our world that is tragic and profound, it seems strange to speak about something so simple as Jesus changing water into wine. When so many thousands of people are dying in Haiti after the earthquake that shattered their country, a story about a wedding banquet seems strangely insignificant. On a weekend that we celebrate the memory of Martin Luther King Jr, who led a movement that changed so much of our thinking in this country about the worth of every human being, this story seems so old, and simple. But the gospels still point to this story of the wedding at Cana as the first sign of Jesus' identity, as the Messiah sent by God, and so we should pay attention.

The true meaning of this story is how Jesus changed everything in our world and in our lives, when he came and dared to challenge how people thought and how they lived. Jesus changing water into wine is a symbol of how, through faith, God can change everything in our lives! God has already transformed us through our baptism into Christ, by adopting us as God's own children, part of one human family, the Church, which is the very Body of Christ in the world. It's also a symbol of how through Jesus, God brings joy into this world, instead of mere judgment and obedience, so that you and I can know the joy of life, as we live with faith, following our Lord. Joy like in a wedding banquet. This is no small thing!

So let's say that the six water jars of purification represent all the traditions in our lives, which bring meaning to us. They represent the way we have always seen things, that keep us thinking that our spiritual lives are all about washing our selves clean and purifying our dirty selves. That keep us looking at others the way

we always have: that some are family and friends, but others are strangers or aliens. This is what God sent Jesus to change.

Jesus changed all that kind of thinking, starting with his changing of water into wine. And he didn't stop there! Jesus noticed those who were sick or suffering, whom others thought would always be that way because their condition was a consequence of their sin, and he reached out and healed them. Jesus talked to those whom no one else would talk to. Jesus noticed those who were "invisible" to others, and brought them into his flock. Jesus crossed borders and reached out to those who were outcasts and aliens. He met with a woman in Samaria when no one else would do such a thing, had a "holy conversation", which convinced her that she had met the Messiah, and she spread the good news to all in her town. Jesus broke down all the barriers that we human beings build between ourselves and others, and invited all God's children to God's great wedding banquet.

On this Martin Luther King holiday, some of us from the "older generation" remember clearly the way things were in 1960 in our country. When people who were white lived on one side of the street, and people of color lived on the other. When people drank from different water fountains in the southern states, and lived by unfair, different rules. Though it wasn't so harsh in this state, we all considered ourselves different, and all lived with the same understanding that this was just the way things were. Those jars of water would remain standing like they always had.

Then prophets rose up among us, like Martin Luther King and others, who said these old ways of thinking were mistaken, and called us all to change. And over time, we did. It was people of faith who followed Jesus that who this change. The civil rights movement began in the church, and grew in the church, and led to a great change in our nation. Now, a generation later, we have seen many things change in our land, and in our community, though we still have a long way to go. Because many children and families of color still do not enjoy the same opportunities and privileges that we who are white enjoy. Children of color still do not graduate at the same rate as white children, and people who are poor do not live as long or with the same health as those who have means. Racial and economic injustice still have their unwelcome place in our world, and far too often even in our churches. We have too many jars standing in need of new wine.

But Jesus has come, and God has raised up prophets and people of faith to bring us to another place, to a new way of thinking. To those whose "joy" has run out, Christ has come to change our despair into joy, hope and love. Jesus has come to show us that God is present, through him, in our lives today, to bring the joy of God's justice into our world today. It may not happen overnight, but it will come, because Christ is with us! Our old ways of thinking, of depending on ourselves and being alienated from our neighbors, will one day be transformed, through faith in the God who has sent Christ into our world to change everything! And when

things do finally change, and we all live together in peace and harmony, it will be a great and joyful day, and we will all celebrate like a bride and groom with their families and friends at a great marriage feast! For even when you and I feel that our water jars are empty, that we have run out of options and are feeling hopeless, Christ comes to fill our empty jars with the new wine of faith and hope!

So as you and I come to the table today to eat the bread and drink the wine at our Lord's table, let's remember this great miracle of grace that God has made happen in our lives. That you and I are now God's beloved children, and everyone in this world, across the street and across the oceans, is our neighbor, and our brother and sister in Christ. So let's celebrate this great transformation in our lives, and follow Jesus in faith, so that we can continue the work by which God will ultimately change the world into a "beloved community" of love for one another. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.!

O God, we give you thanks for your healing power in our world. Reveal your love and hope in the midst of the suffering and chaos in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti. Give strength and perseverance to those who offer medical care and food, and comfort to those who mourn their dead – especially the family of seminarian Benjamin Larson.....Move us with your compassion to help bear the burden of this crisis with all your children. Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

We give you thanks for prophets like Martin Luther King Jr., whom you have called to transform the Church and renew our nation with the good news of your justice and love between persons of differing faiths, ethnicities and cultures. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**