

Sermon on John 2:1-11
2nd Sunday after Epiphany, January 20, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ...

When you live long enough, or serve in one congregation for enough years, you remember stories that fit with the gospels we read. For example, almost 20 years ago we did a summer outreach program where we invited the community to Redeemer for weekly outreach events, as a sign of hospitality. We held outdoor jazz concerts, game nights, hosted the Splatter Sisters, Songs of Hope, and finally, “Rib Fest”. It was the Wednesday following a Sunday when the gospel text was the Feeding of the 5000, so I thought it would be a “scathingly, brilliant idea” (to quote Hayley Mills) if we invited the neighborhood to our own rib fest, and gave the food away for free. Surely there would be enough! So we ordered barbecued ribs from Fay and Willie, invited Project Spirit families as well as our congregation, and got ready. About dinner time, I started to worry. I had never seen the undercroft so full, with families and friends of families whom they had invited. Some of you remember this! The serving line formed, and it seemed to never end, reaching out to the parking lot entrance. There was no miracle that night – we had a limited amount of ribs – maybe 200 bones total, very tasty, but no more appeared! The volunteers started slicing the ribs, giving out one spare rib apiece, along with lots of salad or rice. The people in the back of the line started getting testy, wondering “where are MY ribs?” In the end, the ribs ran out, with no baskets of leftovers to send home with the volunteer disciples. I know I didn’t get any. I guess we could have prayed, or blamed God for running out of ribs. But we just didn’t anticipate how many would show up, and we didn’t have a back up plan to provide enough food for the crowd. We don’t usually have this problem in church!

But there was a different kind of miracle. After the food ran out, we had planned to hold a program, so we invited everyone over to the Learning Center. We had our African Drum group teacher there to demonstrate his drumming technique. So Taji started to drum. Kids started dancing. Then some of the adults danced, as well. We had a storyteller, too – so it wasn’t just about the food. We built community! In the end, everyone went home happy, with smiles on their faces. And we told each other that God – and that drum – really saved the day!

Today we read the story about a miracle that worked, because Jesus was there! We know the story. Jesus, his disciples, and his mother were at a wedding in Cana, a small town nine miles up the road from Nazareth. (Maybe like if you and I went to a wedding reception in Minneapolis sometime.) The whole town had turned out, along with all of the extended family’s relatives. Everything was going

great, the food and wine was flowing like water, but then the wine ran out. Word got to Mary, Jesus' mother, who took Jesus aside to tell him "They have no wine!" Horror of horrors! Disaster was about to strike! Like a bar, where the booze runs out. But Jesus said, "What does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." (We will hear this phrase more and more the next two months.)

Well, we know how the story goes. Jesus "changed the water into wine", is how it's told, the "first miracle" of Jesus. But I'm not so keen on calling it only a "miracle" – like Jesus did some "magic trick" to change mere water into the finest wine. The greater miracle is that Jesus "organized" the family and the kitchen staff to use their own gifts and knowledge to transform an impending disaster into a success. Jesus went to the kitchen staff, who had already had water, and large jars, and knew how to make wine. They just needed a plan, to "get organized". They had six large jars for purification (like our baptismal water), so Jesus directed the servants to fill them with water (30 gallons each – 180 total). Then he told the steward to taste the water, and he found that it was turned to wine, fit for serving! The steward told the bridegroom how great it was that HE had served the BEST WINE FOR LAST, when most served the inferior wine at the end of the evening. So this was the first of the signs of God's power in Jesus – who didn't even get any credit (except from us, today).

The real story is about God's power and abundance, flowing like water, pleasing like the finest wine, given freely to everyone who showed up at this community wedding. Like Isaiah 55, which we read at the Easter Vigil, who said to exiles returning to Jerusalem: "*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price! Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in rich food!*" (Is. 55:1-2)

Like the promise of the prophet Isaiah in chapter 25, when he said that "*on this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.*" (Is. 25:6)

So we read this story about a wedding celebration, family hospitality, good food and wine, which almost ran out, until God sent Jesus to intervene, and show what is possible with God! What does it mean? Of course, it is a sign of God's great abundance, sent when we are most at risk, through the love of Jesus.

Now, I don't care for allegories, interpretations that give each element in a story a deeper meaning, but I think there is a symbolic meaning underneath all of this. Our hospitality as humans has limits, and our abundance is always at risk of running out, turning into scarcity. For example, we had the great achievement of justice in America's Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, led by Reverend Dr.

Martin Luther King, Jr., it's hero and spokesman. The courage he and so many showed resulted in great achievements for justice by those who once had been enslaved, and though they had been set free by law, still suffered from prejudice. But the myth was that the 1964 Voting Rights Act and other legislation "fixed the problem of race" in America. But we know today that this is by no means true! Racism abounds, hate seems to be on the increase, and immigrants and people of color suffer from suspicion, harassment, injustice, detention and even death. And Martin Luther King in a cape is not coming back in the clouds to rescue us.

So, has the "wine of justice and truth" run out in America? Is the party of democracy all over? Will people no longer enjoy the fruits of democracy and faith in America, this land meant to be a shining light of hope and abundant life for suffering peoples from all over the world? We want to say "no".

I think this story from John is a message of hope for us: that God is still watching over us, and does intervene. Jesus and his disciples "just happened" to be present at that wedding in Cana when the wine ran out. Why there? Cana was just some unknown place, a small town in the middle of nowhere, far away from Jerusalem and kings' palaces. But into this unexpected place, God showed up with a miracle, in the person of his son Jesus. All might have been lost, but through Jesus, the feasting and celebration continued better than ever. So celebrating God's gifts of love can happen anywhere, at any time, because of grace! Even here! That's the good news.

So we are here in this church, worshipping at this altar, where we have sung God's praises for more than a century. The growth of our early years has long gone. Those German immigrant families coming to worship and seeking to learn English, with hundreds of their eager children - those days are long past. Today we have our financial challenges. The world around us is full of conflict, division and uncertainty. Our nation, especially our democracy, seems at risk.

But we can take heart in the promise of scripture, that God's wine of abundance and mercy has not run out, as shown by Jesus at the Wedding in Cana. God is still here. Jesus is still present, in the word, in the bread and wine, in the forgiveness and reconciliation we receive here, and bring outside our doors.

This weekend we celebrate the vision and ministry of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, who once had a dream, a vision for America that the abundance and promised democracy would one day benefit EVERYONE. The days of the Civil Rights era ended in legislation and new hopefulness of the "freedom and justice for all" promised by our nation's founders. These days it seems we have taken several steps back from the equality promised in America, especially around race - our confounding American sin. But Martin Luther King would not be discouraged by the push back, or the reality of lingering prejudice and hate. He quoted a Unitarian minister named Theodore Parker, who called for the abolition of slavery way back

before the Civil War, and said in an 1853 sermon “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” One hundred years later, King quoted him in the midst of the struggle for civil rights. Be patient, don’t be discouraged, but work for justice. For that is God’s will, he seems to say, so keep the faith.

It’s like our motto in Isaiah: *Have faith, not fear!* That’s what we are called to do, as people of faith in a God of abundance! Yesterday, 1500 people of faith gathered at the Minneapolis Convention Center for ISAI AH’s *Claiming our Voices* event. We celebrated our work in the past year, when we protected immigrants with legal defense funds in Hennepin and Anoka counties, defended access to affordable healthcare, won paid family leave and sick days for workers, helped raise the minimum wage and fought for people caught up in the criminal justice system. But even after those successes, there is much work to be done. We can’t just wait for a miracle from God, like Jesus magically turning water into wine, or turning racism and injustice into justice and equality with a magic trick! We can’t wait for God and the angels to do our work for us! God calls you and me through the Church, and organizations like ISAI AH, to get organized and do God’s work!

For God has created each of us with unique gifts and talents, knowledge, skills and wisdom. God has also given us eyes to see and ears to hear our neighbors’ needs with compassion. We don’t have to wait for “the government to do it for us”, or for God to do our work for us. We are the hands and feet of God, the eyes and ears of our Lord. So God has given us all that we need to do God’s work as people of faith, to hear our neighbor’s cry, and to be lights to the world.

So that’s our hope, as you and I gather this morning to worship and pray. God hears our cries, and promises to be with us always. We don’t ask God to take away all of our challenges, or do our work for us. But we do ask the Lord to take our hand and lead us, so we can stand, even when we are tired, weak, discouraged and worn out. And even through the storms of our lives, God promises to lead us. So we sing, “*Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.*” We sing this not just for ourselves, but for all of us: you and me, the Church, our community and world. Amen.