

Sermon on John 2:1-11/Commemoration of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 17, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

“Are we out of wine?...Are you serious?” I can just imagine the thoughts going through the wine steward’s head as he contemplated the unthinkable at that ancient wedding in Cana, the setting for Jesus’ first miracle in John’s gospel. The party had been going splendidly for several hours. The food had been served, and it looked like all the relatives and important guests had eaten. But it also seems that the whole town of Cana had shown up, with the addition of some special guests: Jesus and his disciples had also been invited. The music was playing, and the dancing had just started. But when the steward sent to the kitchen for more wine to serve the thirsty guests, all he got was a blank stare – and the words: *“What wine? All that we ordered is gone. There is no more wine.”*

What are we going to do? No wine? It was unheard of in those days. A wedding was the time when whole towns showed up to feast at the home of the bride’s family, and even the poorest of families managed to save up or borrow enough so that there would be enough food and drink for everyone. Even if they had to dilute the wine with vinegar and water, there was always enough. Except for this time. When the wine gave out, Jesus’ mother heard about it, and so Mary told Jesus, “They have no wine.” We don’t know if she expected Jesus to do anything about that – maybe she just told him this as information, as she clucked her tongue in sympathy. (tsk, tsk, tsk – no wine left, at a wedding!) Jesus actually said that it was of no concern of theirs – *his hour had not yet come*. But for some reason, Mary told the servants to do whatever Jesus told them.

So Jesus went out back to where six large jars of water – for the rites of purification - were located. He told the servants to fill them, which they did, with 180 gallons of water. Then he said to pour some out for the steward to taste. The steward couldn’t believe how good it was, and called the bridegroom over to compliment him: “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests are drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now!” It was a miracle! So everyone had plenty to eat and drink, and the best wine was served last. Now Cana in Galilee was on the map, as the place where Jesus’ first miracle took place – where his glory was revealed, *and his disciples believed in him*.

Have you ever been to a wedding where they ran out of food and drink? I haven’t! I don’t think it ever happens – or at least it’s rare! It would be a disaster, don’t you think? Have you ever served a party or a dinner where you ran out of food, as the host? Be honest! No? How about a church potluck? Never?

Well, there was one time when we ran out here at Redeemer. It was about 10 years ago, maybe more. I remember it well. It was summer, and it was one of our weekly community/family nights, when we held an event we called “Ribfest”. We had planned it for weeks. The Sunday before we happened to read the gospel about “Loaves and Fishes” – where the food never ran out. So – you guessed it – we decided to make it a “free” event (one of my hair-brained schemes – I’ll take the blame for this one). We had ribs for 200 – but once word got out, the undercroft was over-flowing with neighborhood families, plus our own church folk. Early on I got word that the ribs were going fast. Carla and Rebecca started trimming the ribs down to one rib per person. Then parents had to share with their kids. But we had plenty of rice and salad. Finally, the ribs ran out. Some didn’t get any. A few folks were upset, but it wasn’t a total loss. The church was full! We had African drum music and dancing in the Learning Center afterwards – so everyone had a great time. But I will always remember this as “the day that the ribs ran out”. I’m no miracle worker. Jesus changed water into wine, but I can’t create ribs out of nothing. This is not a farm. We’re city folk. And that’s the truth.

Back to the gospel - about that wedding. Somehow it seems that this story is about God’s abundance in the midst of scarcity. How you and I often discover that we are tapped out – out of energy, out of ideas, out of resources – maybe out of money. The bridal party in the gospel ran out of wine – the most essential part of a successful wedding, even more than the food! Today, in the church, and often in our lives, we feel that we have run out of time and money – our most important resources, we think. Last week, we had to draw on our reserves in the Vanguard Account to make payroll – and it’s not the first time in our 125 years that we’ve had to do this. We do it every heating season. And so, we think, we’re out of luck! We’re done. It’s time to shut the doors, and quit.

Then, and only then, it seems, we start to pray. We don’t know what to do ourselves, so we pray to God, and ask for a miracle. Maybe God answers, maybe not. But if we keep praying, and also keep our eyes open – and most of all, keep on praising God and keeping our eyes out for our neighbor – we may discover what is at the heart of the matter: *that Jesus is present with us – even in our perceived scarcity – present in the Word, in the bread and wine, in the acts of kindness and love that are shared in Jesus’ name with our neighbors.*

Truth be told, some say that “the wine has run out” when it comes to the whole Church these days. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has shrunk by some 2000 congregations in the 25 years since we started, and membership has declined from 6 million to 3-1/2 million – so we’re not the only ones! There are a lot of Lutheran churches like ours that have gone from worshipping 150 per Sunday to less than 100 a week. There are a lot of reasons for

this – some due to location, or cultural shifts, shifting demographics or age. It's a common story throughout the United States. There are lots of studies about this, but mostly we don't know why or what to do. Some say that the wedding party's over, and within a generation the Church as we know it may just disappear. That's why so many people are so scared about the future, I think. What's going to happen to an institution that has been so central to our existence for so long?

So I look back at this story in the gospel about that wedding in Cana, for some clues – because we need a miracle about now! One thing I notice is that no church, synagogue or Temple is mentioned. The wedding feast is at somebody's home, of course. And Jesus is present there, at the party at home, out in some village somewhere, far away from Temple or church. His mother notices there is a problem, and tells Jesus about it (the wedding party is in danger – there is no wine). And Jesus' first comment is: "Of what concern is that to you and me?" So what if the party's over for the Church? Do you think that Jesus is going to disappear? No, Jesus' work will continue – no matter what happens to the Church! And essentially, in the gospel, Jesus just tells people to use what they have. They have six large jars for purification rites – just fill them with water. You have water, right? Okay – serve it to your guests. Then the water became wine, and it was enough – and it was better than anything else that you had prepared, because you hadn't planned for it, and just served it out of faith and obedience to the Lord.

Maybe we have to look at what we have, instead of what we lack. We may not have much money – but that seems to be all that's drying up. And actually, we have much more than many communities do around the world – we just have to learn how to share it! We have people (to be sure, not as many as before) with an abundance of gifts and talents – and there are a lot of people in this city who need faith and hope these days! We have a roof over our heads, we have wine and bread, we have lots of candles. But most of all, we have people, we have the gospel, we have faith, and Jesus Christ is present with us – and that's all we need.

We have all the gifts for ministry that we need to bring life into the Church – and more importantly – the love of Christ out into the world! Read the words of Paul in his letter to the Corinthians: *"Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord... To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses."*

So when we gather together, we have all that we need - when we use these gifts for the common good, for the building up of the whole community. The wine

has not run out. The Church is not “tapped out!” Through faith, we have enough, when we are in Christ.

But we have another problem – if that’s how you perceive it. It’s the Martin Luther King holiday, and the Church has a race problem. Last Thursday evening there was a webcast event that we hosted at church, when we watched our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, facilitate an important conversation around race in the Church. To be honest, our attempts to become a multicultural Church in the ELCA have so far been a dismal failure – if you count the numbers. In spite of our efforts, we are still over 95% white. We still have a long way to go in raising up leaders from other communities, cultures, and ethnic groups. If this were a wedding, you might say the wine has run out for the Lutherans!

But if you look at it with the eyes of Jesus, you might see something else. There are a lot of people who want to see the Church look different than we do at present, who want to grow and learn from other communities in our midst. We have become a much more public church, more willing to take on difficult subjects like racism, sexuality, poverty, crime and justice, unafraid to say that *Black Lives Matter!* Our congregation is in a richly diverse community with many gifts, and we have opened the doors to new congregations starting up and to support groups and ministries that are so critical to the well being of people who live here. But most of all we have a rich heritage of faith, a willingness to try new things, and we have the gospel – the good news of God’s mercy, forgiveness and love, in Jesus Christ our Lord, who died for us all, so that everyone might have life, through faith! So we actually do have all that we need, to grow and to reach out with this “new wine” to the people of this community!

It seems to me that the most important thing we can do as people of faith is to cast off our fear, and use that faith to do the wonderful things that God has called us to do. Sure, there are a lot of things that people are afraid of these days. Many people are afraid of the changes that are coming to the Church, and to this world – many of these changes have already come. That is what a lot of the anger is about that we see in present political campaigns – it’s all about fear of the future. But that’s where we come in, as the Church! We have faith in a God who has created us all, every human being as sacred, with gifts that God has given to each one. Our calling is to profess our faith in this God who has made everyone sacred and precious, who has promised an abundant future for all. So let’s stop living in fear, and whining that our wine has run out, and live with the hope that God has given us through the gift of Jesus Christ! For Jesus is here, and present with us, to guide you and me into a future that is full of hope and life! For even when we all die, we have the certain hope that we shall all indeed live, because of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus! So let’s live as we believe, with hope and faith in this God who has given us life – and share it with the world! Amen.