

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY (C-RCL) – January 20, 2019

Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2: 1-11
University Lutheran Church, Cambridge MA; Imogene A. Stulken
Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: [Cyprus, Greece, Turkey](#)

“On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’”
[John 2:1-3, NRSV, italics added]

Although she isn't named in the Gospel of John, the mother of Jesus is the first person mentioned in this story. Appearing here at the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, she appears again at the end, where we see her standing near the cross. Thus, she bookends, or frames, Jesus' ministry in this Gospel. [John 19:25]

Wedding festivities typically lasted seven days. [Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John (i – xii)*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, n. ii 1.a, p. 98] We don't know which day of seven this was when the mother of Jesus notices that there is no more wine, but whichever day it was, running out of wine could have been viewed as an embarrassing – even shameful – breach of hospitality on the part of the bridegroom. It has been suggested that, at least to some extent, the supply of wine at these festivities was dependent on the gifts of the wedding guests – that it was a BYOW – as in Bring Your Own Wine – affair. Is it possible that the wine ran out because not enough people brought wine? Is it possible that guests – perhaps including Jesus and his disciples – were too poor to bring wine, thus contributing to the shortage? [J. D. M. Derrett referenced in Brown, p. 102]

I would guess that many, if not most, of us have been to a wedding. Some weddings and receptions are more memorable than others – not just for what went smoothly, but for what didn't go exactly as planned. A case in point: Robert Fulghum, Unitarian Universalist minister, in his book, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*, tells his “quintessential wedding tale.” The unnamed Mother of the Bride (hereafter known as the MOTB) wanted *everything* – Every. Last. Detail. – to be perfect for her daughter's wedding. She orchestrated all the pieces – including the hiring of an 18-piece brass and wind ensemble (as the church organ was too “churchy”). She called Fulghum weekly. (The caterer called him to ask if this was a wedding or an invasion!) The day of the wedding finally came. While the guests

arrived, and then while the wedding party (with nine bridesmaids) came down the aisle, the bride was waiting with her father in the church reception hall. In Fulghum's words: "[She] sampled first the little pink and yellow and green mints. Then she picked through the silver bowls of mixed nuts and ate the pecans. Followed by a cheeseball or two, some black olives, a handful of glazed almonds, a little sausage with a frilly toothpick stuck in it, a couple of shrimps blanketed in bacon, and a cracker piled with liver pâté. To wash this down – a glass of pink champagne. Her father gave it to her. To calm her nerves." She walked down the aisle – with a very white face. Just as she walked by her mother she threw up – that is, "she hosed the front of the chancel – hitting two bridesmaids, the groom, a ringbearer, and [Fulghum]." This was, of course, all caught on tape by three video cameras. [Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*, New York: Ivy Books, © 1988, 1989 by Robert Fulghum, pp. 7 - 13]

"And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come. His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'" [John 2:4-5, NRSV, italics added]

Note that the mother of Jesus doesn't tell the bridegroom or the steward about the lack of wine; she tells *Jesus*. Does Jesus' use of "Woman" in speaking to his mother seem harsh and impersonal to you? Biblical scholar Raymond Brown suggests, however, that it "is not a rebuke, nor an impolite term, nor an indication of a lack of affection," but rather that it is "Jesus' normal, polite way of addressing women." [Brown, p. 99] From the cross, Jesus uses this same word to address his mother when he sees her and the beloved disciple standing together: "Woman," he says, "Here is your son." Then he says to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple takes her into his own home. [John 19:26-27, NRSV] — And there's that word "hour" again. We note here that in John's Gospel, "hour" refers to Jesus' glorification – which is Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection.

So, even though Jesus appears to distance himself from becoming involved, the mother of Jesus seems to have no doubt that Jesus will intervene, though she doesn't try to control how. Did you catch that? She believes in the effectiveness of Jesus' words even before they are spoken! Serving as a catalyst for what will happen next, she connects the servants

with Jesus to carry out his instructions; thus, she expands the circle of caring. In this regard, a commentator noted:

I wonder whether the wine giving out could be a metaphor for the life and joy going out of our lives, our churches. Who will notice, who will advocate? Sometimes we will be in need of someone who notices something wrong – sometimes we will be the one to go to Jesus on behalf of someone else. This story shows a community (the wedding gathering) that relies on the person who notices – and acts.

[A Working Preacher User, comment on Karoline Lewis, “Commentary on John 2:1-11,” January 16, 2013 at 02:09 PM, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1556, accessed 1.15.2019]

“Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said, ‘Fill the jars with water.’” [John 2:6-7a, NRSV, italics added]

Six jars each holding 20 or 30 gallons – that comes out to between 120 and 180 gallons of water! How far, I wonder, did the servants have to go to get the clean water? Were there lots of servants to carry this water? Or did just a few have to make many trips?

Have *you* ever needed to carry a bucket of water from a well – or out of a basement perhaps? For many years at the New England Synod Assembly, Doreen Rinas and Pastor David Rinas have prepared displays and led workshops on behalf of ELCA World Hunger. To illustrate the time and effort involved in obtaining clean water in some countries, they have filled two 5-gallon water jugs and then asked volunteers to lift them and imagine carrying them while walking the average of 3.7 miles needed to get daily household water. (Just for the record: Five gallons of water weigh about 40 pounds.) But it isn’t just in African countries where access to clean water isn’t readily available to everyone: Consider, for example, the case of Flint, MI, with its toxic, lead-infused water. I read an article recently that quoted a man as saying, “I won’t live as well or as long because I drank this water.” April of 2018 marked the end of a free bottled water program in Flint; however, as of this fall at least, many people were still only drinking bottled water. Churches took notice and took action –

working to distribute bottled water to as many people as they could while their supplies lasted.

“And they filled them up to the brim.” [John 2:7b, NRSV, italics added]

The servants don't just fill the jars – they fill them to the brim! But our jars are not always filled with cool, clear, clean water. Michelle DeRusha, writing in the January issue of *Living Lutheran* notes: “We fill our days to the brim with busyness, checking items off our to-do lists, running endless errands, cramming our calendars with social events. . . . Thus, we avoid the silence, stillness and solitude necessary for self-reflection . . .” If we're not accustomed to taking regular times for stillness and silence, she suggests: “Try sitting for five minutes each day this month in a quiet, comfortable place, away from the distractions of your phone, your to-do list and your loved ones.” [Michelle DeRusha, ‘Perspective: Pruned Open,’ *Living Lutheran*, January 2019, Volume 3, Number 10:36-37, p. 37]

At other times, our jars are not filled at all; they may even be, at times, nearly or completely empty. Expressing this concern in the U.S. House of Representatives on Wednesday, January 9th, recently sworn in Massachusetts Representative Ayanna Pressley said: “So today I rise to lift the voices of the unheard. I rise today on behalf of the families concerned about feeding their children because their WIC benefits will run dry. I rise today in solidarity with the thousands of workers with calloused hands and broken spirits working for no pay. . . . Today I rise as one and I stand as thousands.”

[<https://www.facebook.com/CREDOvideos790547907953423>, accessed 1.11.2019. emphasis added]

“[Jesus] said to them, ‘Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.’ So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’” [John 2:8-10, NRSV, italics added]

So Jesus *does* respond and gives orders to the servants to act. Jesus, the invited guest, becomes the host who provides wine – and what wine it is! This is not a grand public gesture with trumpets blaring and whistles

blowing. Not even the bridegroom or the steward knows where this good wine comes from. But the servants – those on the margins, those perhaps invisible workers – *they* know!

In Fulghum's wedding story, after her daughter's disgorging, the MOTB fainted; yet, life flowed out from the confusion. Guests went to the reception hall for the interim, and, in Fulghum's words: "The bride was consoled, cleaned up, fitted out with a bride[s]maid's dress, and hugged and kissed a lot by the revived groom." – who held her "in his arms through the entire ceremony." [Fulghum, p. 12]

"Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." [John 2:11, NRSV, italics added]

This is the first of the "signs" in this Gospel. (John, by the way, does not call them miracles.) What is the purpose of a sign? To point to something, to give directions or instructions. One definition of "sign" is: "an object, quality, or event whose presence or occurrence indicates the probable presence or occurrence of something else."

[<https://www.google.com/search?q=sign+definition&oq=sign+de&aqs=chrome..69j69i60l3.4586j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>, accessed 1.11.2019] Thus, the water becoming wine isn't the stopping point; rather, it points to something – or, in this case, to *someone*. The disciples – who by this point also must have learned the source of the good and abundant wine – have seen Jesus' glory revealed and now believe. Believing, or coming to belief, is important to this Gospel writer. There are 84 occurrences of "believe" or "believes" or "believed." Near the end of the Gospel, John states the purpose of the book: "Jesus performed many other signs as well – signs not recorded here – in the presence of the disciples. But these have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Only Begotten, so that by believing you may have life in Jesus' Name." [John 20:30, *The Inclusive New Testament*, Bretwood, MD: Priests for Equality, 1996p. 205]

How appropriate that this first of Jesus' signs is performed at a wedding celebration! Jesus manifests God's glory *here* – not in the presence of principalities and powers, but in the presence of family and friends. God's nearness, God's mingling, as it were, is here in this intimate setting – *this* is where scarcity is turned into abundance! [Gail R. O'Day, "John," in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors, *The Women's Bible Commentary*,

London: SPCK; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 295; Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez, "Commentary on John 2:1-11, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2748, accessed 1.15.2019]

As Pastor Luke L. Bouman notes: "The Gospel text is not only a story about Jesus as Messiah; it is also about what kind of Messiah. God's gracious participation in our world as a serving presence sets the table for our understanding the cross and resurrection as revealing the very heart and mind of God.... God will enliven and enrich the world as God intimately connects with humanity. Wine flows out of the jars in spite of the water within. Life flows out from the empty tomb despite the power of death. Where we create scarcity, where we manufacture a dull existence for ourselves, God gives life and 'pizazz' in abundance." [Luke L. Bouman, "Pastoral Reflection" (includes reference to conversations with Rev. Karen Ward of Seattle, WA), Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 14, 2007, in "Preaching Helps" in *Currents in Theology and Mission*, October 2006, Volume 33, Number 5:435-437, p. 437]

The prophets Amos [Amos 9:13-14], Hosea [Hosea 14.7], and Jeremiah [Jeremiah 31.12] all speak of an abundance of wine as a symbol for the joy that is to come. Speaking of joy reminds me: that infamous MOTB? Well, on the wedding couple's 10th anniversary a party was held. A feast was laid, best friends were invited, and all the films were shown on three different TV screens. Who organized this party? None other than that MOTB! Having forgiven everyone - including herself - for their parts in the "unforgettable" wedding, it was the MOTB who laughed harder than anyone else. [Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*, New York: Ivy Books, © 1988, 1989 by Robert Fulghum, pp. 7 - 13] There was an abundance of love, joy, and grace at that couple's wedding. I like to think that Jesus was invited to be present as a guest at the wedding and at their anniversary feast, for Jesus came that we may have life - and have it abundantly. [John 10:10]

Whether we choose to drink wine, whether we choose not to, or whether we cannot or should not drink wine, let us find our own abundant "symbols of joy" - not necessarily in something grand and showy, but perhaps in those precious moments with friends and/or family but also, and equally importantly, in those times for personal meditation, stillness, and silence. And may we try to imagine joy, believe in joy, and act on joy. Let us try to imagine something that is so satisfying, so *delicious*, and at the same time so *abundant* that we *have* to share it with others. Then let us *believe* that this grace-filled abundance is God's gift to

everyone – even to those whom we deem to be undeserving or whom we don't like very much. And then let us find our way to **act** – either as individuals or as part of the community – to manifest God's presence to the world.

Postscript: Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Traditionally the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is celebrated between January 18th and 25th each year (that is, between the feasts of St. Peter and St. Paul). The theme for 2019 is: “Justice and only justice you shall pursue.” [<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/week-of-prayer/week-of-prayer>, accessed 1.18.2019] January 15th would have been the 90th birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Our MLK Week observance at UMass Lowell is set for the last week of January; this year’s theme is: “A Time to Dream: Imagine, Believe, Act.” The Rev. Laura Everett, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, noted: “Every MLK worship service, every Week of Prayer for Christian Unity service, every day of service is an opportunity to recommit ourselves to the counter-cultural Christian reality that we are one in Christ for the sake of the world. And that oneness propels our work for justice, because if we are one, then I cannot abide the injustice that befalls my kin. And our justice work propels our desire for unity, as we see the ways that interconnected systems of oppression seek to diminish God’s people.” She continues: “Here’s what I believe: Jesus does not ask us to choose only one, unity or justice. Both unity and justice are demands on our Christian faith. We cannot pick one. Christ holds them both together ...” [E-mail message, “Unity AND Justice...Come work with us!” Massachusetts Council of Churches <meagan@masscouncilofchurches.org> Fri 11/8/2019 9:43 AM] There is an abundance of work to be done . . . But do you remember? In December, UniLu celebrated its 90th birthday and Chris Pollari took “family reunion” photos. So, yes, there is an abundance of work to be done, but just think about the abundance of gifts – gifts in all their varieties – that members and friends of this congregation bring to that work! To each of us is given, as Paul writes in the Second Reading, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”