

LELC 2nd after Epiphany MLK Weekend

I'm not gonna lie. John's Gospel is not my favorite. It got better after the gig I had that was doing the narrative lectionary and I had to do John texts for six months straight. I realized that John is all metaphors. All the characters are archetypes for somebody. But who, exactly, are the characters in our text for today? It really isn't so much about the people. It's about some events. It's about the wedding, and the water, and the wine.

This text is almost always preached as being about God's miraculous abundance. There are sometimes doctrinal overtones about water and baptism, or maybe wine and new covenant. Blah. Blah. Blad-de-blah. (Can you tell I'm not big into doctrine? And can you also tell that's probably not where I'm headed?)

When I was working with this text this time around I kept having this nagging sense that we are missing something about this text. Something important. Something that would have been drop-dead obvious to the 1st-century audience that John was writing this Gospel for. It would have been one of those "goes without saying" sort of things, such that John just didn't have to say it. So, let's start at the beginning. There is a wedding. In Cana. Mary is invited. So are Jesus and the disciples. We do know that weddings in those days were pretty big deals. There would be food and drink, wheeling and dealing, and celebrating. A wedding could last for days.

Weddings were community events. And at least to the last big feast - everyone was invited. Though I doubt there was a formal invite sent out. It was probably more like a pig roast (no offense to the Judeans of Jesus' day, a wedding was a fattened calf event to be sure.) Invites to pig roasts usually worked more like this:

You hear the Peterson's are having a pig roast Saturday? You should come. Their son just had a new baby, after trying a long time. They're inviting practically the whole county.

I got to go to town that day.

Come when you get back. There will be plenty. I heard Joann's been making potato salad for two days. See you there.

It was pretty much expected that everyone would come and share in the feast.

It was probably when I was in the multi-cultural setting in Dallas I became aware of how celebration events like birthday parties, and quinceneras were sort of the communal food events. Extended families seemed to have something at least a couple of weekends a month. And it seemed to be a way they provided the folks among them

who were food insecure with a good meal without the subtle putdown of extending charity.

That's actually even more true in Biblical days. That wedding feast that Mary, Jesus and the disciples were at. There is no mention of the family. Or of the happy couple. The point of John's story is that they were all at a wedding, a feast to which the community would have been invited. You can imagine that quietly, at the edges of the party, the widow and her two hungry kids were getting something to eat. The migrant workers came in, filled their plates, and sat eating, hungrily, along the far wall. If the wedding lasted several days, they would get to be well-fed again tomorrow.

And then the text tells us "the wine gave out." Mary goes and tells Jesus they were out of wine. Why is that a big deal? What did that mean? It is exactly this point that makes me think I am missing something important. What does being out a wine mean at an event such as this?

At pig roasts, I can tell you, events where everyone is invited, where people come when they can and join in on a party in progress. Depending on the occasion it's the sort of event where folks might be there, eating and drinking, talking and laughing, until the sun comes up. Or the beer runs out..... In which point folks mosey on home and the host packs up the leftovers and eats roast pork and potato salad for the next week or so.

What if, in Jesus' world, (and John's world too) the social mores of the day were that guests – the whole community - could come and eat and drink with the wedding celebrants until the wine was gone? Was that when the guests were expected to leave, the party was over? And then were all the leftovers of that fatted calf packed up and taken home to be eaten by the folks who threw the party in the first place? Did the end of the wine mean the end of the sharing of the food? Surely nobody would ever just "act" like they were out of wine so they didn't have to keep sharing food would they?

Did you know that that Bible has some pretty pointed condemnation for that kind of behavior? It's in Leviticus 19:5-8. It is an abomination to eat flesh offered as a thanksgiving sacrifice on the third day. This is not a food safety rule. This is a community food sharing rule. The way sacrifices were supposed to work is that if you were thankful for something you should go make a sacrifice. God got the smoke and the aroma and the people got the meat, to share with everyone who was there at the time. If you were still eating the meat from the sacrifice on the third day, that

meant you weren't sharing it. Or not sharing it widely enough. You were keeping too much for yourself.

Now, let's go back to the wedding at Cana. If that is what was going on there, if "running out of wine" meant that the hosts got to tell all the poor folks "Go home" and keep all the leftovers for themselves – that makes what happened next uproariously funny to those original hearers: the wine is gone. Mary tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do. They fill up six huge jars with water (150 gallons worth) And viola' it's wine. 150 gallons of wine!!! That host is never going to run out of wine. The guests are welcome to stay, and party, and be fed nigh onto indefinitely. I can almost imagine the poor folks of that Johannine community, who themselves might have been escorted out of a wedding feast or two, just laughing and laughing at the thought of how Jesus showed those stingy hosts!!!

But the gospel of John is always more profound than that. John tells us in the end, that this was the first of the signs that Jesus did. Water was turned into wine. Scarcity was turned into abundance. But maybe it is also about how our miserly human hearts will always try to find the loopholes not to care about our fellow human beings. Maybe it's about how rules and social mores can only take us so far. Maybe it's about how Jesus, about Jesus' way of love, is the only thing that can change that. Maybe it's about how true sharing, the kind of sharing that doesn't look for an escape not to care, but the kind that looks for ways to care and to share, only comes through the love we know in Jesus.

In John's gospel and John's letters, over and over, it's about Love. Love is of God. God is love. Love one another as I have loved you. Jesus is God's word of love incarnate. And the first sign in John is at a wedding. A wedding where the problem wasn't that the wine ran out. The problem was that love was absent. Except that Jesus was there. The spirit of love was there. Love opened their hearts. Love opened the way. Love was the Way.

Now, I know that this is a time we take to remember Martin Luther King Jr., the great civil rights leader. He spoke a lot of mighty fine words about freedom and justice, equality and opportunity. But before he was a civil rights leader, Rev. King was a pastor. He spoke eloquently about the beloved community. I like to think he was talking about the kind of community where people, black people and white people together, could love each other. Not the paternalistic "ain't I a great people for being so nice to those people" kind of fake love. But the real kind of love, the kind that cares fiercely - like a mama bear, that kind of love that wants the best for the

other person, the kind of love that knows oneself incomplete if the other is not part of one's life. Of ourselves, we don't have that kind of love. But Jesus does. And it's ours by the power of the Holy Spirit. John's gospel tells us that Jesus, Jesus' love, turns our very human business-as-usual into an endless wedding feast.

As we come to commemorate the Rev. Dr. King this year, I am aware that, when it comes to well-being of all God's people, legislation and rules get us only so far. And God help us when people of ill-will are allowed to turn back any of those rules as they have been doing almost unabated. But far too many people of color in far too many parts of our society are waiting, still waiting, for some of that justice to flow down like water. Some water of justice, a whole bunch of water of justice, would be a really good start. But I don't think that is what God dreams for any of us. I think God desires us to know the wine of peace. And the only way the water of justice becomes the wine of peace is love, love changes us. The spirit of love we know through Jesus transforms our hearts and lives.

My prayer today, and all days, is that we know that love. We know that we are loved. And, knowing ourselves loved, we love one another, we love the stranger, the other, even our enemy. May that Spirit of love be among us, and abide with us, always.
Amen.