

Message for the Second Sunday after Epiphany, Year C (1/16/2022)
John 2:1-11

In the midst of a new wave of COVID infections and all the corresponding concerns for both safety and community life, I questioned how our Gospel from John might speak a word of grace and truth to us today. Usually, the story of the wedding at Cana overflows with joy, immersing us in the promise of God's surprising abundance. It's an illustration of the "grace upon grace" that Jesus embodies for us, the fullness of life for which he has come. And, I suppose it's good to be reminded, as one interpreter puts it, that "our Lord once attended a wedding feast and said yes to gladness and joy."¹ It's helpful to hear again that the life of discipleship need not be dry, so to speak.

But, maybe you're not in the mood to celebrate right now. Amid the worry and weariness of COVIDtide, and especially this month, you might be forgiven for having a lackluster response to the famous story of Jesus turning water into wine. As far as miracles of grace go, this one seems a little frivolous, doesn't it? So, a few partygoers go wild with an unexpected surplus of the good stuff; what about the countless people who go hungry instead? So, a small community gets the chance to toast the finer things in life; what about all the communities that struggle just to survive under the weight of any number of inequities? So, the guests at a

¹ Robert M. Brearley, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 1, 260-2.

wedding feast get to revel in joy; what about those of us whose spirits are broken by grief?

On the other hand, maybe the story of the miracle at Cana is exactly what we need to hear in a time of trouble. Keep in mind that the wedding guests in John's story aren't out of touch with reality; the majority of people living in first-century Palestine are barely scraping by on Rome's authoritarian watch. No wonder Jesus catches the attention of so many common people – his ministry makes clear that the reign of God means good news for the poor, freedom for the oppressed, and blessing for the meek and the mourners.² And, the profusion of good wine at a village wedding is a sign of that coming reign, a momentary vision of a better world, one with a table long enough to seat everyone and abundance widely shared. I can toast to that.

The celebration at Cana reminds me that sorrow can and does mingle with joy, grief with laughter, suffering with sweetness. Indeed, how can our hope for a better world survive long-term without a little delight in the meantime?

In anticipation of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, I wondered this past week how the Rev. Dr. King might have found joy even at the height of the struggle to which he devoted his life. And, recalling that our mid-January commemoration every year marks his birth, not his death, I wondered in particular how he might have liked to celebrate his birthday. Did you know that Dr. King's favorite dessert

² Luke 4:18; Matthew 5:4-5.

was pecan pie? He was from Georgia, after all. Did you know that he loved baked macaroni and cheese, and a gelatin, whipped cream, marshmallow, and fruit salad his mother called “Quilly”?³ Did you know that he did not abstain from good whiskey, and that he enjoyed playing pool? Have you seen the color photographs of Dr. King playing with his children in their backyard and sitting down to family dinner? Combining even three or four of those favorite things, can you think of a better way for a giant in the movement for civil and human rights to celebrate the fact that he was born?

There’s wisdom in surrendering to gladness from time to time. To partake in joy is to invest in resilience, to take the long view under difficult and pressing circumstances. As Emma Goldman famously said, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.” It’s probably a misquotation,⁴ but it’s the truth nonetheless, the same truth that resonates from the story of the wedding at Cana. There’s a holy relationship – a marriage, if you will – between perseverance and pleasure, between struggle and celebration.

So, “don’t hesitate,” the poet Mary Oliver urges us in the event of an epiphany of joy:

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy,
don’t hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty
of lives and whole towns destroyed or about
to be. We are not wise, and not very often
kind. And much can never be redeemed.

³ www.tasteofhome.com/collection/martin-luther-king-jr-s-favorite-foods/.

⁴ www.lib.berkeley.edu/goldman/Features/danceswithfeminists.html.

Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.⁵

Joy is not made to be a crumb. No, according to the first of Jesus' signs in the

Gospel of John, joy is made to be 150 gallons of the best wine. Friends, ours is a God who delights in us, who lavishes us with grace in the best and the worst times. The promise of the gospel is not that life will be easy, but that God is good, and God's steadfast love endures forever. And, since this is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!⁶

⁵ www.wordslikethis.com.au/dont-hesitate/.

⁶ Psalm 118:1, 24.