

January 17, 2016
Second Sunday After Epiphany

“Running on Empty?”
by Mary Anne Biggs

1 Corinthians 12:1-11 ~ John 2:1-11

One Communion Sunday, when I was serving the church in Nekoosa, I had one of those moments that usually only occur in my dreams. The ushers came forward to serve communion and the bread was passed through all the pews. Now it was now time to pass the wine (well, the Welch's.) Just as the coverings were lifted on the communion trays, I noticed that the cups were neatly arranged in concentric circles, but they were bone dry... not a drop in any of them. The ushers noticed it too and never missed a beat...they quietly walked into the sacristy, filled them all and seamlessly slipped backed in so that everyone could be served.

Well, that happens sometimes, doesn't it? And most of the time we don't handle it as gracefully. Sometimes when we run short on essential resources we feel that just can't handle it. We know that we our exhausted, bone dry, run down ... and then we feel embarrassed somehow about not keeping up our grinding pace. Burn-out is a common side affect of the schedules we keep these days. We are spread awfully thin across our work, our church, our family, and our other obligations. And it just gets to be too much sometimes. John used to have a sign like this in his office ... for those of you who can't see it, it has the word "Whining" circled with a red slash across it. But that is sometimes easier said than done. I may run out of W-I-N-E but I never seem run out of W-H-I-N-E! It's so easy when you're busy ... even if you're busy with good work ... even when you believe in everything you're doing ... to get tired, to loose passion. That's why the story of the wedding in Cana speaks so powerfully to me.

On the surface it's a simple story. But just below the surface the Gospel writer John has so many allusions to the church in his day ... that it soon becomes clear that he isn't telling the story of a wedding once upon a time ... but of the church every time we gather. He even starts the story with a very significant Christian catchphrase ... "*On the third day.*" Every Christian knows that "on the third day" Jesus rose from the dead. So this is an Easter story, right here near the beginning of John's gospel. It's a Sunday story about when the church gathers to celebrate the resurrection, because every Sunday is Easter in the church! And John is comparing our Sunday worship to a Jewish wedding party.

I love that image. I need that image of worship as celebration. Worship should be the time to wake everybody up and quicken our pulses. Once in a while something should happen in worship that makes you laugh or cry or want to shout ... if nothing makes you mad or glad ... and you never walk out of here differently than when you came ... then maybe we are doing it wrong. Sure we have serious business to attend. And worship does require work, for all of us. Did you know that the literal meaning of "liturgy" is "the work of the people?" But, hey, we're

here to celebrate the grace of God. We're here to party, and there's just no party like a Jewish wedding in Jesus' day... just like the energizer bunny...they went on and on and on!

Jesus and his just-called disciples are there. So is his mother who tells Jesus that the wine has run out. And as we all know "if momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy!" I had a sign in my kitchen with that sentiment...and a companion sign that read..."If daddy ain't happy...who really cares!" But I digress. The point we should be pondering is why is she unhappy? Why is it her problem? One commentator suggests that maybe Jesus and the disciples are the reason the wine has run out so soon ... which goes with the idea that Jesus was something of a party person and that he was blessed with a healthy enjoyment of life and friendship and community. Remember what Jesus said? "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there." And when he said "I'll be with you always"...the "you" in that statement is plural ... not singular. Had Jesus been from the South he would have said "all ya'll." Jesus wants us to get together, and he is with us as we come together. We need each other! It's not a party if it's just you!

Mary says, "The wine has run out!" "So what?" Jesus replies. "Whose problem is it?" Literally, a Hebrew curse, "Woman, what to you and to me?" Yikes! Just calling somebody "Woman" is pretty strong. "Woman!" isn't the kind of caustic retort we expect from Jesus.

This is the first time that John mentions Mary and he doesn't mention her again until the cross and he never calls her by name, only by title: "the mother of Jesus." And John doesn't have any birth stories like those in Matthew and Luke. But just like at the Nativity, Mary has a role in the birth of Jesus' ministry in this story, and like giving birth, there's some pain involved. She confronts and nudges and they have words. Sometimes you do have to push your kids a little to get them to fly out of the nest. But let's be careful not read too much in this heated exchange. Mediterranean families are apt to be more animated in their conversations than some of us are used to. It's just part of being family. And Mary goes back to Capernaum with Jesus after this wedding, so it makes sense to believe that they were still close.

But we can't deny it ... at the wedding, they do have this exchange. And Mary just ignores Jesus' reply, and instructs the servants, "*Do what he tells you!*" That statement jumps out of the story. And you can rest assured that she's not just talking to those servants. She's talking to "us servants" about what we must do when the wine runs out. "*Do what he tells you!*" And what does Jesus tell us? He tells us to pray. He tells us to love. He tells us to serve. He tells us to care of the least of these. He tells us to pull away when we need to ... not to desert ... but to find Sabbath so we can rest and renew and return. He tells us to meet ... to take care of each other ... to forgive ... to nurture ... to sustain. You don't run away at the first exchange, because that's just part of being family. And you don't leave the party when the wine runs out ... you turn to Jesus and do what he tells you.

Jesus, the good son, wanted his mother to know that he was an adult... he doesn't do miracles on demand ... he will make his own decisions about the timing and direction of his destiny, thank you very much. Nobody controls Jesus. But Jesus, the good son, cares about his mother's cares ... and the about the embarrassment to this family ... and the joy of a young couple at their wedding. So he tells the servants to fill six jars with water.

These aren't just any jars, either. They are jars used for the Jewish rites of purification. In the days before running water, they were used to fill the *mikvah*, or Jewish baptistery, which was used for ritual washing. Hmmm! Water into wine ... could John be connecting baptism and communion here? Or is he wanting to say that Jesus has fulfilled and renewed the ancient faith of his people ... poured new wine into old wineskins... to use an image from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, only for John it's "new wine into old water jars"

According to John, this is Jesus' first miracle. Only, the miracle is barely mentioned in passing. The emphasis just isn't on the miracle ... so much as the meaning here. Jesus tells the servants to fill the jars with water, then take a cup to the chief steward (sort of the wedding coordinator or chief caterer.) But the chief steward, who's supposed to be in the know, like the chief priests and scribes of Jesus' day, had no idea where this good wine came from. He credited the host: *"Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the bad wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."* Jesus doesn't demand credit. The host got the credit. Maybe John wants to suggest that the true host of our party is Jesus himself.

John says that the chief steward didn't know but that the *servants* did know. Isn't that always the case? If you want to know what's really going on, ask the custodians. Talk to the secretaries. Have a word with the kitchen crew. They know. The folks in charge *only think* they know ... they only think they're in control. But the servants know.

In John's day the church wasn't the province of the powerful. It was mostly lower class ... the dispossessed, mothers and other women, servants, the poor, the least of these ... who got it. They knew the source of the good wine. And Jesus' disciples got it, because they believed. Which begs the question ... do you get it? The servants know. The disciples know. Do you know where to go for the good wine?

You see, this isn't just a quaint tale about how Jesus saved a party. It's God's word for the church in our day ... and for us ... when the wine runs out. What should we do when we're running on empty? First of all, we have to admit it. A lot of us just go on pretending, even to ourselves, that nothing's wrong. But we're exhausted. We're angry. We start snipping at our friends and family, even the people who care about us most ... maybe even blow up at somebody and dump all our frustrations on one person all at once. And we have trouble admitting that the joy is gone, the soul is empty, the wine has run out. We need to listen to what our body ... our heart ... our soul might be telling us. Maybe the Lord is trying to tell us something. That's what Sabbath is for ... to stop, look and listen to what the Lord is telling us. *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled"* (Matt 5:6).

Most of all, when we're running on empty, we've got to go to the Source! This story shows us where we will find help. Writes Marcus Borg, *"What is the gospel--the good news--of Jesus about? John's answer: It's about a wedding banquet at which the wine never runs out, and where the best is saved for last."* We don't serve alcoholic beverages on these premises or at church functions ... not only because we are sensitive to those whose lives and families have been deeply hurt by alcoholism ... but because we don't need it. John is telling us ... Jesus is the wine at our party! Jesus fills us with good cheer ... makes us giddy with exuberance ... lowers our inhibitions and the walls ... that keep us from being honest and tenderhearted and

affectionate with each other ... inebriates us with the presence of God. It's scandalous, to be so drunk at seven-thirty and ten a.m. on a Sunday morning! You remember what the outsiders said when the disciples were filled with the Spirit at Pentecost? They said, "*They are filled with new wine!*" (Acts 2:13). They just didn't get it... do you get it?

What we do here is serious, but it shouldn't be somber. And sometimes, we just need to lighten up and let God go with it. We can't do it under our own steam. Our energy, our passion, our resources won't last. We have to rely on Jesus. Don't separate your external *well-doing* from the internal *well-being* which flows from the fountain of life. Don't leave the party where the other servants are serving the new wine of Christ. Do the work, but don't forget to celebrate as you go. This is a party and Jesus is our host. He has invited us all to join the festivities, and nobody is excluded but those who exclude themselves. Pray. Worship. Rest. Serve. Find in Christ the rhythm of life that brings joy to your being and makes you a joy to others. And when you run out of wine, don't drop out and run away. Turn to Christ in trust and do what he tells you. The servants know. Soon you'll taste the new wine, and the party will start up again. May we pray?

Dear Lord,

Mother us into using our gifts for your good purposes. Nag and nurture us and push us out with confidence to do good work for you. We turn again to Christ...the source of life. Teach us to rejoice in all things, to celebrate grace and see it at work in our own lives. Fill us with the new wine of your Spirit. Revive, reform, relieve, refresh, resurrect us today, and we will be your servants in the name of our precious Savior. Amen.