

The Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 20, 2019, Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Hamden, CT

Readings for the Day (see attachment for texts):

Isaiah 62.1-5

Psalm 36.5-10

1 Corinthians 12.1-11

John 2.1-11

Can you imagine what that wedding party planner must have felt when it first came to his attention that there was no more wine in the house, that the seven-day (yes, seven day!) bash he had so carefully arranged was about to go belly up, not even halfway through it?

Talk about a sinking feeling!

It was his job to keep the party goers happy and the wine flowing.

But somewhere along the way there was a terrible miscalculation.

One minute he was standing off to the side

thrilled at seeing people having a smashingly good time,

and the next he was pierced with this dreaded sinking feeling.

The wine was gone, and the party, and his career, were heading south. And fast.

But then, I suspect most of us, in one way or another, can identify with this party planner.

Most of us, that is, know what it's like when the wine, the joy and gladness of life, runs out and we are left empty and drained.

One minute life seems good,

and the next, well ... you have this terrible, frightening, sinking feeling.

Mere words can drain the wine right out of life, words like...

"We've tried hard to make this work,

but with the way things are going now, we just have to let you go. Sorry."

"Your tests just came back. I'm afraid they're not what we hoped for."

"There's no easy way to tell you this, but I need to say it anyway..."

You know that sinking feeling, when the wine gives out,

when the air gets sucked right out of you,

when love is lost, when life is drained of purpose and meaning.

Many know it these days as the shut down feeling —

work or no work, no pay, no resolution in sight, and a load of anxiety.

In the church these days,

that sinking feeling is also known as that shrinking feeling —

you know, downturns in membership, in giving, worship attendance.

We're not alone in that feeling here in Hamden.

That shrinking, sinking thing is being felt in every corner of the church.

It all leaves us feeling a bit empty, even helpless and fearful.

Now, let's take a slight turn...

There's something quite awkward and strange
 about that fleeting conversation we overhear today between Jesus and his mother.
 Mary, with an observant mother's eye,
 notices the disaster that is about to fall on the party. She pulls Jesus aside.
 The wine's all gone, she says, implying that he should do something about it.
 From just about any angle of the ear,
 Jesus' reply is rather brusque and oddly formal (perhaps a touch humorous too).
 It comes down to something like this: "Woman, why bother me with that?
 It's not my problem they're running out of wine. Let me be.
 I'll do my thing when I'm good and ready. Don't push me."
 Now we could struggle over that response for some time,
 or we could do what Mary did.
 Rather than ponder those words in her heart,
 she, with a mother's instinct and wisdom, trusting that Jesus would do something,
 turns to the servants guarding the dried up jugs of wine
 and says with unwavering authority and confidence:
 "Do **whatever** he tells you to do."
 She had no clue how Jesus would act, or what he might say.
 She could only trust that he would do something. **Whatever.**
 Which, when you think about it is a mighty audacious thing to do.
 Rather than providing Jesus with specific instructions to remedy the crisis,
 rather than tell him to take care of the impending disaster
 in the ways she thinks appropriate,
 the kind of advice we are all pretty quick and willing to offer Jesus —
 Mary trusts that he will respond in his own way, not knowing just how.
 Blessed is Mary, we sang back in Advent, for her openness ...
 her openness now to Jesus' life giving "**whatever** he says."

Now we all pretty much know the rest of the story.
 We just heard it... the wonder of Jesus' "whatever" --
 how he snuck back to where the servants were trying to shrink into hiding,
 hoping that a riot wouldn't break out among the soon-to-be thirsty revelers.
 Jesus tells them to go roll out the big, heavy stone jars,
 the jars used for ritual washing — for cleaning up before and after eating.
 But now Jesus has another purpose in mind from them.
 A new purpose for old jars...something Jesus does a lot of, we discover —
 like re-purposing people's lives too.
 Roll them to the closest water spigot, and fill them to the top, he says.
 And they did just "whatever" it was he told them, as silly as it sounded.
 Six big old stone jars filled to the brim,
 about 210 pounds worth of water in each of them, which is a whole lot of water,
 which is, of course, a whole lot of wine, the way Jesus works --
 turning something we consider quite ordinary into something quite extraordinary.
 It all happens so quietly.

No one, absolutely no one, not even mother Mary, sees this coming.
 No one saw what really happened. No abracadabra. No fanfare.
 And when the steward, the party planner in chief,
 hiding in the shadows fearful of what might happen next,
 is given a taste of the water from the jars,
 he is totally blown away by this stunning taste of the goodness of God,
 the wonder of Jesus' life-giving "whatever."
 When he rushes over to the bridegroom,
 who has remained blissfully ignorant of the near disaster
 now about to turn into the party of the decade,
 and shouts out loud for everyone within near earshot to hear:
 "why you cagey fox -- everyone else saves the Manischewitz for last
 when most people are so far gone there can't tell the difference,
 but you've flipped the order of things,
 you've saved the best, the most elegant, robust, richest wine until last!
 What's up with that!?"

We know, of course from our perch watching,
 that the bridegroom had nothing to do with it,
 and if he would have had anything to do with it,
 he very likely wouldn't have done it that way at all.
 Which, of course, should awaken us from the very beginning
 (for this was, in John's Gospel, Jesus' first public sign pointing people
 to the upside-down, life transforming ways of God at work in the world)
 that Jesus doesn't necessarily follow social convention
 in revealing the real wonder of God's grace.
 There is, that is, an immense difference
 between, as the steward puts it, "what everyone else does,"
 and the holy, unexpected "whatever" Jesus does.

You see, into those sinking, sunken, deflated, nearly barren-of-hope places
 in our lives,
 there comes this daring invitation from mother Mary today:
 listen to his voice, open yourself, make yourself available to his word,
 trust in his way, however odd it may at first sound.
 Dare to discover the most extraordinary grace
 in the most ordinary gifts placed before us.
 Welcome Christ's body and blood born in bread and wine,
 the simplest of gifts overflowing with life giving mercy and healing love
 binding us together as one at the table.
 See the small-maybe-to-you donation of food or money that can for another person
 possibly tip the balance between scarcity and abundance.
 Hear a soft spoken, deeply felt, humble whisper,
 "I'm sorry, please forgive me for how I have pained you,

let's work to find a new way together," opening up brave new possibilities.
 Listen to the Spirit stirring among you, St. Paul sings to the church today,
 and know that you are provided with gifts more than sufficient
 to lead you into a new, re-purposed, day beyond shrinking numbers,
 bearing Christ's healing presence to a thirsty, yearning world,
 to people and in places still unseen and unimagined.
 For God is at work among us making all things new.

So here's the thing...
 in daring to lean with trust into Jesus' "whatever,"
 into his word, his way, his empowering presence,
 however odd or strange it may sound or seem to us or to others, one thing is assured...
 grace will abound, water will become wine,
 and you will know and taste and see the abundant goodness of God.
 In this time when we are peppered and pounded
 with the sinking fear of scarcity and hollowness,
 in this trying time of divisiveness and noise,
 God is always seeking to open our eyes
 to know the grace of God's abundant goodness
 revealed for all people in the life and love, the death and rising of Jesus.
 From his fullness, John sings at the beginning of his gospel
 and shows us all the way through it, we have all received grace upon grace,
 which, any way you measure it, is a whole lot of grace.
 And that is what we come to know
 every time we open ourselves to Mary's bold suggestion:
 "whatever he tells you, dare do it."
 Listen to what he says:
 "Love one another as I have loved you."
 "Forgive not just seven times, but seventy times seven,"
 which means you just stop counting and keep opening the door.
 "Feed and clothe and house those starving for hope and help,
 for just as you do this to the least among you, you do it for me."
 "Welcome the stranger, the alien in your midst,
 for you just may be entertaining angels without knowing it."
 "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you."
 Be light for a darkened world. Be salt in a world yearning for taste.
 See how God's love is not diminished by being expended.
 It grows and increases all the more by its being given away, freely.
 Don't be afraid. Dare listen to him.
 Dare to follow in the way of his "whatever" he tells you."
 For his word, his direction is always life giving. Trust in his word.

And in being swept up and embraced in the rising tides
 of grace upon grace beyond all measure and expectation,

we will sing as one with the Psalmist of old:
"How precious is your steadfast love, O God...
all people feast on the abundance of your house...
you give them drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light."