

# MAKING MERRY

John 2:1-11

The Second Sunday of Epiphany, January 17, 2010

Rev. James Campbell

I have mentioned before that I have a “thing” for Mary. And I know it’s most un-Protestant of me. But how can we not be interested in the woman who had such a major influence upon the One we follow? How can we not wonder what he learned at her knee; what stories she told him that might have found their way into his repertoire and our canon; what values she instilled in him that formed his identity and mission? It seems to me that if we’re really interested in knowing Jesus, then it’s high-time that we got over our anti-Marian attitudes and begin to give her the respect that a strong, courageous, wise woman deserves.

Given how I feel about her, I was a little disappointed this Advent season when the lessons and the church preaching schedule did not allow me to talk about Mary. Imagine my delight, then, when I read today’s Gospel lesson. Here we have a Mary story, and one of the few that is told after her son was all grown up. And quite a story it is.

Mary and kin had been invited to a wedding in Cana of Galilee, about 9 miles northwest of their home in Nazareth. We don't know anything about who was getting married, but we know a great deal about what a wedding was like in first century Palestine. Unlike today's affairs, in which guest lists are fretted about and fought over, in Jesus' day there was not list. The whole village was invited. Weddings were seen as a time to make peace with enemies. And while we plan to spend a day getting ready for, attending and reception; these folks would have been partying for days. And this party would have been a welcomed break in a very difficult life. People in the first century worked hard and died young. And so when they had a chance to celebrate, they ate and drank and were merry.

Well everything at this wedding was going along just fine until the most embarrassing thing happened: the wine ran out. And in Jesus' day, just like our own, parties often end when the bottles run dry. We are led to believe that the wine ran out long before it was supposed to for there is an underlying sense of embarrassment in the way we discover this social faux pas. We hear the voice of Mary, almost in a whisper, as she leans close to her son and says: "The wine has run out."

And the response we get from Jesus is enough to make us wonder about his manners: "Woman, what is that to us? My hour has not come." I remember that as a child I was rather scandalized by the way Jesus spoke to his mom, especially by calling her "woman." As an adult I was relieved to learn that "woman" was actually a term of endearment. The rest of what he said, however, is not quite so endearing. "What do you want me to do about it? It's not time yet."

I can imagine that if Mary was anything like my own mother (or yours), she gave Jesus a long, hard look and then mumbled "whatever." Then she turned to the servants and said: "Just do whatever he tells you."

In the house were 6 stone water jars – huge things that held 20-30 gallons each. They were used for customary Jewish rituals of purification. Jesus told the servants to be sure that each one was filled to the brim. The servants did as they had been instructed. Then Jesus said to them: "Take some of this to the steward and ask him to taste it." What happens next is quite humorous. The steward said to the bridegroom: "Sir, I just don't get it. Most people serve the very best wine first, wait until all the guests are feeling no pain, and then serve the cheap stuff. But not you! You saved the best for last!"

John then makes an interesting observation: "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." As one who grew up in a very dry household in which alcohol was thought of as evil, I find it more than a little amusing that it took 150 gallons of good wine to make believers out of the disciples.

This text is often read and preached at weddings. Preachers do that because this is the only place in the entire New Testament in which an actual wedding celebration is referenced. But look more closely and you'll see that this text is not really about the wedding. It's about the party that follows. And it's even more about the wine. The wine is the main character in this story, and as the main character, it has a very strong voice. It's a metaphor for the ministry of the church. The wine is a metaphor for the way we are called to live in the world.

It strikes me as wonderful and refreshing to realize that the very first miracle Jesus ever did was not to heal someone or raise someone from the dead or confront the oppressive powers that be. His first miracle was to make people

merry. Jesus supplied the wine of gladness to people whose day-to-day lives were anything but glad.

And given that this was Christ's first miracle, isn't it odd that merriment has so often been ignored by the church? When do we ever think of Jesus as being the life of the party? When do we ever imagine that he enjoyed his wine and danced with the bride and had a hearty laugh? Now most of us in this room know how to party, but when have you ever heard anyone seriously discuss "making merry" as a ministry of the church or throwing a great party as an act of Christian discipleship? If we followed Jesus in making merry, do you think it might be a tonic to those outside these walls who are convinced that Christians are people of judgment and anger and self-righteousness?

Not long ago I read the story of a once-grand but now struggling downtown UCC congregation. These folks called a new pastor hoping that she could turn the tide for them. One of the first things she did was determine to serve the people who actually lived in the neighborhood and not just those folks who still drove in from the suburbs. She started a women's Bible study, but the neighborhood women who came were anything but church ladies. They were single mothers and addicts and street walkers and homeless. In this grand old

building there was a fancy parlor that was hardly ever used. And the pastor discovered some fine china that had been put away for years. And so she and some of the church members washed the china and cleaned the parlor and invited the women of the streets to gather there for their Bible study.

Now, I believe in Bible study and I have no doubt that those women's lives were changed by it. But that's not the main thing they talk about as they describe their study group. Instead they talk about the beautiful room in which they sat and the porcelain from which they drank and the dignity they were given by their surroundings as they studied what it meant to follow the One who once made some other poor folks very merry. One woman told the pastor that this was the very nicest thing that she had ever done. It was the ministry of fine tea and fancy cookies. And it made her merry indeed.

Well, I couldn't read that story without thinking of the poor folks that this church serves. And I couldn't help but wonder what it would mean for them if instead of making them stand outside for an hour, in all kinds of weather and then handing them a bagged lunch – what if we invited them into our space. What if instead of a cold sandwich and a cookie, we served them a hot, delicious meal. And what if we could do it in such a way that it didn't seem

like charity at all but more like a party that the whole village was invited to.

Do you think that might make their hearts merry? Would it make our hearts merry? Would it rejoice the heart of the One who kept the wine flowing?

Now I wondered this week if I could preach this sermon at all this week after the horrific earthquake in Haiti. Talking about parties seems so trite in the face of all that suffering. Those folks there don't need a party. They need food and water and medicine. But then it struck me that just as soon as we clean up that mess and bury those dead and move on, then another tragedy will strike somewhere else. It is the nature of our existence that twin towers fall and bullets kill prophets like Martin Luther King and the earth trembles under our feet. It was even worse for the people of Jesus' day. All around him were people in need, dire need. And yet, the first miracle he ever did— the first time he ever got anyone's attention; the first time others began to wonder if maybe, just maybe he was the One promised from of old – it was when he paused long enough to enjoy the moment that was and to be merry; and to make merry. And it seems to me that we follow him best when we do the same. Thanks be to God. Amen.