

Sermon: Sparking Joy Text: John 2:1-11 January 20, 2019
Rideau Park United Church Rev. Steve Clifton

The very first congregational event I attended at Rideau Park was a celebration. Two search committees had completed their work and a new ministry team was beginning. So there was a party to celebrate. And when Keva and I arrived at the celebration we were very surprised. In addition to food at this gathering there was wine. After 13 years serving rural churches this was a small culture shock. Wine at a church gathering? Wow. We really were in a new place, a strange new world.

In my experience serving churches in rural Eastern Ontario, alcohol was kept out of sight when church people gathered. In one of my former charges, I know people would hide their alcohol if I was coming to their house. This was because some years before me, a minister had a habit of checking people's refrigerators when he made a visit. A bottle of beer or a bit of wine would earn a disapproving comment. In that church community alcohol and faith didn't mix.

In my family tradition, on my mother's side, there was a strong streak of temperance. The Temperance movement began in church communities as push for temperance, for the cautious use of alcohol, in order to minimize its negative social impacts. Temperance became abstinence. Abstinence became prohibition. My maternal grandmother was a Scottish Presbyterian. My grandfather was a German Congregationalist. And neither one of my grandparents ever tasted alcohol in any form in all their long lives.

The Christian tradition has a complex and nuanced relationship with alcohol. When we celebrate communion in this church we use grape juice and not wine. In the 1860s. Rev. Thomas Welch, (think of Welch's grape juice) a Methodist minister perfected the process of pasteurization to aid in grape juice being used with communion. Our use of grape juice in communion has its roots in the Temperance movement.

In the Anglican tradition celebration of communion requires wine- grape juice wouldn't count. In my seminary days we always had two cups with communion, one for grape juice and one for wine. This practice honored the tradition of both Anglican and United Church students.

Wine has held a symbolic significance in our faith tradition. The German mystic Meister Eckhart used the image of wine to speak of the blessings of God. Each of us, he said, was like a grand house and deep within there are cellars that we never visit, that we have forgotten. These forgotten storehouses are filled with wine, wine of the finest vintage. The wine is God's Spirit. Deep down in us God is there. If only we would look.

In 2018 our own congregation has a nuanced understanding of alcohol. We host a large AA group every week. And if you have wedding reception or a family party in our hall you can get a license and have wine. Church dinners and congregational gatherings may include wine.

And the Biblical tradition is nuanced too. The apostle Paul condemns drunkenness. He also wrote that a little wine was good for the stomach.

In Jesus day wine had a practical use. Given the climate and a lack of clean water, wine in your water was a public health necessity. Wine in your water made it safer to drink.

And in Jesus time wine was a part of celebration, as it may be is now. Jesus attends a wedding in Cana and the wine runs out.

Cana was and is a little village near Jesus hometown of Nazareth. Nazareth is built up on a hill. Cana is at the foot of that hill. Jesus was at a party in his own region. Weddings were communal celebrations and Jesus and his mother and his disciples were there.

And then the wine ran out. And this was a serious problem. The inability to provide what the guests needed was a failure in hospitality that would bring shame on the wedding hosts. We may read the story and wonder why the family of the bride and groom failed to provide enough wine. However, it was ancient custom for guests to bring wedding gifts in the form of food and drink to share the burden of providing for such a large group. So the lack of wine may indicate a lack of community support or a lack of communal resources.

At the encouragement of his mother Jesus helps out. John`s gospel, where this story is told is full of Jesus doing wonders. This is the first one. And it`s the only one in which someone`s health or safety or life is not at stake.

Unlike the healings or the exorcisms – or even the stilling of the storm or the multiplication of loaves – no one is in danger at this wedding party, and Jesus performs this sign simply for... the *joy* of it. To keep the party going.

To be sure, in those days wine was generally safer to drink than water, but guests who didn`t want to drink water could simply have left the party and gone home. There was, strictly speaking, no *need* for this miracle – so its inclusion here has more to do with its value as a *sign* ... A sign of what?

In the Hebrew tradition, the prophet Isaiah imagines a divine party, a messianic banquet, a holy supper. In Isaiah 55, Isaiah writes that when the world ends, when God reigns. Death will be lifted off of humanity like a shroud and there will be life and love and welcome and hospitality. All the nations may come. Everyone is included. And God is the host. Isaiah envisions God`s presence as a party and it`s an amazing affair. The “best of food and the best wine”, the prophet proclaims, is shared at the table of the Lord.

In his first miracle at the wedding in Cana Jesus is giving a sign. He takes water and makes it into wine. And it`s the best of wine. Jesus as his ministry begins turns water into wine and it will be

about welcome, hospitality, celebration, joy...The wine will overflow and the party will continue. The reign of God is near.

I think of the minister who went before me by a few decades in the rural community that I once served. I was told that when he visited he would look around to see if you had beer or wine. And if you did you would hear about it.

When you think of God, is your God a bit like that? Is God poking around in your stuff, in your life, looking for things to chastise you about? Is God out to get you?

Is God a bit like a divine Elf on a Shelf, always watching, waiting to catch you out?

A friend of mine talks about going to a party and being asked what he does for a living...and when he mentions he is a minister he says that the room goes silent and the music stops and pretty soon everyone starts heading home... it's an exaggeration... but is that how we think of faith and church and God...? God the killjoy? God the wet blanket? Or do we think of God as one who likes some people but rejects others? If God had a party do we think we'd get invited?

And what about the church? Do people see us as a place of joy? A place to live, fully, abundantly, vibrantly.

As his very first sign Jesus keeps the celebration going. Jesus first act is to further the joy. Jesus first miracle is a foretaste of the kingdom of God in its fullness, where God is the gracious host and the food is great and the wine is the best. Jesus reminds us that God is about welcome and joy. And the people of God, we are too.