

January 16, 2022  
Epiphany 2 (C)  
United, Oak Park

### **The Party Isn't Over**

On the first Sunday that I visited Advent Lutheran Church, I couldn't help but notice that the North Philadelphia congregation inhabited a tall building with an impressive limestone facade in a neighborhood filled with rather modest three-bedroom row houses. I could only surmise that the church had been an anchor in that area of the city throughout most of its existence.

On that day of my first visit, one of the longtime members of the congregation offered to take me on a tour of the building. It was pretty typical for a lot of church buildings constructed in densely-designed urban neighborhoods of the 1890s. Though the building's footprint was relatively small, quite a bit was packed into it. The main floor contained administrative offices and a large room used for Sunday school assemblies and fellowship gatherings after services. A lower level contained many smaller rooms used for classes and meetings. Meanwhile the main worship space of the church was actually one floor above the street level. That extra height allowed for the placement of

huge stained glass windows on all sides of the building, despite the otherwise close neighbors at street level. The nave itself was big enough for at least 400 people, with pews curved in a semi-circle to gather worshipers as close to the pulpit and altar as possible.

After I remarked on some of the notable architectural features of the place, my tour guide for the day took me through the choir gallery and he showed me a picture in a nearby hallway from a few decades earlier that depicted as many as 40 or 50 singers in the choir. But by the time of my visit the choir had dwindled to just three people, not enough even to sing the four-part anthems that they still attempted each week.

And at that moment I realized that my tour guide for the day was stuck in the past. He was telling me about how things *used* to be there. He was clearly mourning the loss of what that congregation had once been in previous decades, when nearly everyone in the neighborhood had a German last name and would have had many things in common with most everyone else in that congregation.

But Advent Lutheran Church's current neighborhood wasn't anything like that anymore. Most of its current residents were African

American or from Puerto Rico. Their families were not from generations of German Lutheran stock. Yet the congregation, to its credit, was trying to identify with its current neighborhood by developing a youth gospel choir and having one of its two weekly services in Spanish. Meanwhile a 6-week summer program of the congregation gave neighborhood children something safe and meaningful to do, as well as providing a way for the congregation to attract many younger families into its life. While I could see many things flourishing in that congregation in the present, my tour guide seemed to be stuck in thinking only about how things had been in a previous era. Just how God was leading that congregation to minister in its current reality was lost on him. He only seemed to be trying to *reverse* the hands of time.

In the first few chapters of the gospel according to John we come to understand how God entered the world in an *entirely new* way through the life and ministry of Jesus. Though he was born into a Jewish culture that was steeped in centuries of tradition, Jesus' presence offered something different. While John doesn't have a story about Jesus' birth per se, the first chapter of this gospel comes to a

climax when it proclaims: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

What immediately follows those lines of John’s prologue are stories about how God came into being through Jesus’ baptism and his calling of the first disciples. And then we come to today’s reading about Jesus’ first miracle performed at Cana. One of the things we are hit with in this story is the immense amount of wine that Jesus was able to produce when the wedding feast seemed to be in danger of ending sooner than when the party goers wanted it to end. When Jesus took the water that was available from the six large jars that were there, well over 100 gallons of wine were produced, and the choicest wine at that. Don’t you wonder about how long the party must have gone on after that happened?

This theme of *sudden abundance* is often repeated throughout the gospel according to John. Everywhere, it seems, that Jesus was providing people with an over-abundance to fill their needs. Jesus provided bread of life, not just for a day, but for an eternity. Jesus gave

living water to a woman coming to fill up a bucket in the heat of the day.

Everywhere we turn in this fourth gospel we encounter Jesus filling some critical needs with more than was thought possible. That water, bread, and wine seem to emerge in abundance probably has us thinking about the ways that God also meets us in the sacraments of baptism and communion. All of the common earthly elements we encounter there are ways that God continues to nourish us, and they are ways that we in turn are strengthened to support a world that also needs the abundant gifts we are blessed to have.

The assisting minister reminds us about that collective mission we have as we leave worship when we pray: “By your Spirit strengthen us to serve all in need and to give ourselves away as bread for the hungry...”

As we will soon learn through our congregation’s annual report, this congregation collectively shared roughly \$5,000 with our missions of the month last year, and we contributed \$12,000 to mission support through our Metropolitan Chicago Synod and the larger church. That

report will also mention a number of the other spiritual and service activities in which we engaged over the past twelve months that cannot be strictly accounted for in dollars and cents. While there is always the potential for continued growth and expansion of our work in response to the good news of Jesus Christ, through reading the upcoming annual report in a few days, we can reflect on how God has indeed blessed us in the past year and moved us to share with others.

Like my tour guide in a North Philadelphia church several years ago, we could look at any set of raw statistics in our annual report and only think about what we don't have. We used to have more people. We used to have more gifts from members. And the pandemic can also have us focusing on what we haven't been able to do, such as gathering a full congregation every Sunday in person for worship, fellowship, and Christian education.

But throughout the particular challenges of this time we have been able to *balance* our budget, *share* many gifts with our mission partners, *open* our building to serve needs of the community, and

*develop* new skills in electronic communications that have enabled us to gather for worship, for meetings, and for education through Zoom.

While we could stay mired in the past and only complain about how the wine has given out and how things aren't at all like they used to be, in fact God is still filling our wine jars in any number of ways every day. Indeed, for as long as we have breath, we can continue to praise God, to serve our neighbors in need, and to contribute to God's mission on earth. *This party isn't over just yet!*