

2nd Sunday after Epiphany 2025  
Romans 12.9-16, John 2.1-11. "Glue"  
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"Six jars, each holding 80 to 120 liters..." Jesus knew how to keep a party alive, didn't he? The wedding celebration was going strong - maybe too strong, actually, if the supply of wine had already run out! This was a practical problem, of course - in first-century Palestine you couldn't just run out to the nearest *getränkemarkt* and restock the wine cellar. More significantly, it was quite embarrassing for the hosts if such a thing took place. In fact, "embarrassment" doesn't do justice to the kind of feelings running out of wine would have caused. In those days, throwing a good wedding party had a really important social function. For one thing, it was a way of spreading the wealth; poorer guests would eat *much* better at the days-long wedding feast than at any other time of the year. Secondly (and at the center of our attention today) such events were essential for strengthening bonds, not just between the bride and the groom, but among their guests. A new family was being formed, one that would need the assistance of their neighbors in order to overcome all the challenges of being a couple, of raising children, of caring for elderly parents, of work.... Not having enough wine would demonstrate that the hosts were not ready to hold up their end of the bargain and be responsible. Failing in the area of hospitality was not just a faux pas, it was a sign that you were not a reliable person. From the point of view of a guest, hosts that ran out of wine were poor planners (in other words - not very smart) OR they were trying to be cheap (saving money at the expense of others in the community) OR they were too poor and too lacking in wealthy connections to contribute to society. So, as you can imagine, running out of wine was not going to be a funny story that your friends teased you about later, it was going to have serious consequences. If the hosts could not be trusted to hold a proper wedding, they could not be trusted, period. There was the threat of ostracization for the young couple (and, perhaps, their parents) if no more wine could be found for the wedding feast. What might seem to us as a minor inconvenience would have, at that time, been a mistake that dissolved the community ties that kept people together.

In this way we can think of what Jesus did as more than just filling a need for the party; (functionally) he was not so much as turning water into wine as turning water into glue! Jesus' care for the community comes through in this, the first of his "signs" in John's Gospel. And while the Gospel writer certainly wanted to pass on to his readers something important about Jesus' identity with this story, it also reveals Jesus' deep concern for meeting people at their point of need, no matter how inconsequential that need may seem. This is the first of many situations in John's Gospel where Jesus not only restores that which has become out of balance - He, unexpectedly, makes things even better than they were originally.

Paul, too, in the reading from Romans is talking with the congregation about glue... though it is rather hard to imagine him being the kind of guy who would keep a party going by finding/making more wine! Anyway, their settings were quite different, too; while Jesus was attending an event in a relatively rural setting, where people likely knew each other and many were even related to one another, Paul was writing to a congregation in Rome that was much less homogenous. In the congregation in Rome, as best we can tell, there were locals, immigrants, and refugees who have now returned to Rome; Jews and non-Jews; women and men; old and young, wealthy and poor. If we were to visit the parish today, we might consider them to be racially diverse (although that social construct was not really a category at that time). It couldn't have been easy to write a single letter that would touch the hearts and minds of such a mixed group. Moreover, Paul had never been to Rome, and as well-traveled and well-educated as he was, he couldn't have known all the details of what it was like to be a Christian in the empire's capital city during the time of Nero.

Maybe it was with a thought to their diversity, though, that Paul decided to give his readers advice about how they should relate to one another. That's not where he starts, though; the bulk of his letter is dedicated to laying out the basics of the Gospel - that God is faithful, that we are all in need of God's grace (whatever our background), and that Jesus is the key to reconciliation with God and with one another. It is only after he has communicated the Good News that he approaches the question of the practical implications of Christian faith on the way we treat others. And that leads to what we have today - a text where he is simply heaping advice on the congregation; it feels like a waterfall of imperatives - honor, care, be humble, bless, rejoice, mourn...on and

on.

[For some of us here in northern Germany, emotions are enemies that distract us from what is most important. But Paul uses very emotional words, he seems to believe that our feelings can be a good source of energy and can help us live in the image of Christ. For example, in verse 11 he says something like “boil over with the Spirit.” Paul wants our feelings to help us reject sin – when he says “hate evil,” he means this literally. We should not be indifferent to evil but have such a strong reaction to it that, when we recognize it, we would not allow ourselves to be pulled in to participate, but instead either fight that evil or at least run away in the opposite direction.]

Now Paul is not trying to ruin any parties with a long list of rules; instead, he is convinced that he will help everyone in the community live a full life if he can encourage them to live in love. This is not about an inner feeling as much as it is about actions that demonstrate real empathy, concern, and a desire to strengthen one another.

In his long list of imperatives, we can discern that it is *relationships* with other people that are most important to Paul, not creating a checklist of rules for holiness. You may not notice it in English, but other languages make it clearer - Paul gives all of this advice in the plural - “you all” (ihr, вы). Here he differs from the philosophers of his time (and the moralists of our time), who believed that the right life is when an individual strives to live according to the highest virtues. Of course, personal responsibility and striving for good are good. You can’t argue with that. But such striving for a better self does not require either Christ or the Gospel; Christian ethics, on the other hand, looks different. It has a way that is both more realistic and richer. The Christian life is a life of being “glued together” in fellowship and mutual support. The Christian community cares about its inner life, about its members - “contribute to the needs of the saints” (.13a); “live in harmony with one another;” (.16a) At the same time, the community remains open to the needs of those outside - “pursue hospitality to strangers” (.13b); “ associate with the lowly” (.16b). Christians treat well even those who treat them badly: “bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” (.14).

What does that mean for the community of Hannover International Worship? On the one hand, this is a community with some continuity; on the other hand, every month the congregation hears a different preacher. Each time HIW gathers there are some new folks in the congregation, and some who come almost every time. Some of you might have an overlapping church commitment, a place where you feel at home on the other Sundays of the month. It is not so easy here to determine who is inside and who is outside...

But perhaps that is not as important today as it was in the first century. We no longer live in such tight-knit communities as before, and there are lots of reasons for that..but perhaps, instead of tight bonds, in our global world, it makes sense to think of how we are glued together in faith and action even as we remain in other ways apart? Perhaps we should apply Paul’s advice not so much to the local parish as to the global community that is even bigger and much more diverse than the one in Rome so long ago?

More than ever before, we are able today to connect with the church worldwide. At ELM, I see again and again the way churches mutually benefit through interaction with their brothers and sisters in other contexts. Here in Germany, for example, we can learn from our partners abroad about congregational vitality, about innovation, about being Christians in difficult circumstances, just to name a few... (And, in fact, we don’t even necessarily have to look abroad to learn from Christians with different cultural backgrounds - you’ll meet some of them when the lay leaders are in charge of the service next month!) Each of us here, with our unique experience, has something to bring something to the table - though, as Paul would remind us, we should be humble about that!

Praise God that a sign has been worked a sign among us - that we have all been brought together, all bound to one another, all that we might know the depth of joy of being a part of one great, big wedding party, hosted by our common savior, Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.