

Embracing the Gifts of Others

Second Sunday after the Epiphany, 17 January 2016: Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 36:5-10, I Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11

I am pretty convinced that Jesus shows up here most Wednesday nights. We're never exactly sure how many people are showing up for Wednesday night dinner. But Dawn manages to produce a wonderful meal that feeds everyone. And each week's meal seems better than the last. She must have divine help.

The gospel of John is organized as a series of signs – miracles of Jesus that reveal his glory and the glory of God. He heals a child, cures a paralyzed man, feeds the 5000, walks on water, gives sight to a blind man, and raises Lazarus from the dead.

The first sign is this one – turning ordinary water into abundant wine at a wedding.

The other miracles are fairly easy to understand. They respond to an immediate personal need, but they also have symbolic meaning. Curing a paralyzed man is about helping us all stand before God. Restoring sight to the blind man is about helping us all see more clearly. Raising Lazarus is about giving new life.

But this miracle, this sign, seems different. Culturally, we're told that running out of wine at a wedding was a huge 1st C faux pas. It would have shamed and embarrassed the hosts tremendously. But does it really compare with the tragedy of a sick child, a blind man, or a dead brother? I don't think so. Yet it is the very first sign, the one that sets the stage for all that comes next.

John the gospel writer explained later, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." In other words, Jesus did many miraculous, loving, saving acts. John could have written about any of them. But he chose these as signs of God's reign erupting in the world in the ministry of Jesus. And by placing this miracle at Cana first in the narrative, John was saying that this is the lens through which we should read the entire story.

So this is what we see. The reign of God is a wedding banquet where the wine never runs out and what comes later is even better than what came before.

The whole ministry of Jesus revealed this glory. God is in this world. Heaven and earth are married to each other. As a result, the world is abundant and fruitful. There's enough food

and love and life to go around for everyone. God's love and grace and joy flow like wine at a wedding.

When we see the world this way, when Jesus opens our blind eyes, when we see through the lens of abundance and blessing, everything changes.

Mary had been around Jesus enough by then to figure that out. She was his mother, but she was also his teacher and first disciple. The song she sang about him she probably sang to him – about God having mercy on those who fear him in every generation and filling the hungry with good things. Mary knew God's abundant goodness. So she came to Jesus and asked him to do something about this situation at the wedding. Jesus wasn't sure the timing was right. I don't think he was being rude to his mother. He was asking a question. But still Mary trusted in mercy and abundance. Still she trusted there would be enough. "Do whatever he tells you," she said to the servants. And abundance flowed.

So with this story in mind, let's turn to a question we are exploring over these weeks of Epiphany. I mentioned last week that we are thinking about things to let go in this New Year. Next week, we will let go of aimlessness and embrace our purpose, then let go of fear of rejection and embrace love, let go of keeping this good news to ourselves and embrace sharing it with others.

Today, I want to think about letting go of the lie that we have to do everything by ourselves.

This is a problem that has been with us for a long time, apparently.

In Romans and Ephesians and here in I Corinthians, Paul or other writers reminded early Christians that the Body of Christ is blessed with many different gifts. All the parts of the Body work together, and no one part is more important than any other part. At least three different early Christian communities needed the reminder which says to me it was a problem even then.

Here in I Corinthians, Paul reminded the church that the different gifts and skills they saw among them all came from the same Spirit. God is the source of all that we do and are. Some have gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues, interpreting what is said. The passage we will read next week from I Corinthians lists more – apostles, prophets, teachers, deeds of power and healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership.

A challenge we face today with the idea of spiritual gifts is the work of translating the concept to our own time. I don't think Paul meant his list to be exhaustive and to say that these particular gifts are the only gifts the Spirit would ever give to the Church. There are other ways God blesses us today. Dawn's gift of feeding large crowds comes to mind. And I don't think he meant this list to be prescriptive, that every church for all time would need

all of these gifts. Speaking in tongues comes to mind. We don't practice that here; some churches do. It's not required. Likewise, I don't think Paul intended to say that these gifts of the Spirit are given only to the church. The gift of healing, for example, is exercised in many places and ways.

But all of the passages about spiritual gifts in the New Testament do make it clear that God's intention is that we are all in this together. The Body of Christ is not solely dependent on any one person. We function best when every member offers what he or she can give to the good of the whole. And we function best when every member recognizes and welcomes the gifts of others.

But this principle Paul gave to the early church applies in our life outside the church as well. Learning to rely on the gifts of others in the church should prepare us to acknowledge and value the gifts of God present in everyone we meet.

Relying only on our own gifts, over-functioning we often call it today, is not only ineffective. It is not merely exhausting. It is idolatrous. It places us and our gifts above others. It says that we are better than everyone else, only we can do the task. It ignores the work and blessing of God in other human beings. We need to let it go.

I know the excuses because I sometimes make them. It's just easier to do this myself. It takes too long to get others involved. I know how I want it done. Or we put ourselves in a bind by waiting to the last minute and then we have no choice but to work alone. This is not life in God's Spirit. It is not a good way to live because it leaves no room for the miracle that happens when we welcome the gifts of others. Even the miracle at Cana did not happen because of Jesus alone. Mary, the servants, the host all had a part to play. Glorious things happen when we work together.

But we are not talking only about being open to the gifts of those we know. The way of Jesus opens our eyes to assume giftedness in all people, even in those we don't know well. It assumes God-given gifts in all God's people should be nurtured and valued, regardless of where they live or the color of their skin or their ability to pay. It assumes if one person's gift is lost everyone loses.

We remember this truth in a special way this weekend. Martin Luther King and others helped us see that American society was harming itself by not welcoming the gifts of all people. People as brilliant and brave as Martin Luther King and George Washington Carver and Rosa Parks for centuries were ignored or denied an education or beaten down or worse. That loss hurt us all. We dare not let it happen again. Who knows what gifts God has placed in children of all colors and backgrounds in this community? The child who will cure cancer or negotiate peace in the Middle East or invent an alternative energy source may be

attending one of our schools. The person who saves your life may not look like you. It is to everyone's advantage to nurture and welcome the gifts of God in all of God's children.

So we need to let go of the idolatry of relying only on our own giftedness or celebrating the gifts of a narrow circle. God has poured abundant gifts and blessing on all human beings. They flow like new wine at the wedding in Cana. They get better and better. We are stewards of all of these gifts. When we see the world this way, when Jesus opens our blind eyes, everything changes.

May the words of Mary be our command as well. Do whatever he tells you. Amen.

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