

**Second Sunday after Epiphany
(Second Sunday in Ordinary Time)**

Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; John 2:1-11; I Corinthians 12:1-11.

Isaiah 62:1-5 uses the image of a wedding as a vehicle for expressing Israel's reconciliation with Yahweh, and God's vindication and salvation of Jerusalem. The prophet declares, "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch" (62:1). Israel was ignominiously conquered by Babylonia in 587 BCE and her "City of God" was destroyed, its temple leveled to the ground. But she will not remain a defeated people. Through the prophet, God promises to vindicate the nation, restore its people from exile and rebuild Jerusalem (vv. 1-2). But God will do more than that!

"You (Israel) will be called by a new name, that the mouth of the Lord will give" (62:2b). What Isaiah declares here is an extremely important insight. God will give his defeated people a new name, the author declares. But to call Israel "by a new name" was not, to a Jew, simply changing their moniker. To call them by a new name was to declare them a new creation, living an existence that was not a previous option. The Hebrew people believed that one's name captured the spiritual essence of a person, and then proclaimed that essence to the world (thus, "Yahweh" meant "he who creates and controls all reality", "Jesus" meant "God saves", "Judas" meant "the Betrayer"). So for Israel to both be liberated from Babylonian control and given a new name was for them to be given a new identity as God's people.

But what is to be Israel's new name? Isaiah tells his listeners. "You shall no more be termed Azubah, and your land shall no more be termed Shemamah; but you shall be called Hephzibah and your land Beulah" (vs. 4). After Judah's crushing defeat and obliteration by Babylonia, people referred to the nation as "Azubah" – "Forsaken". They called the destroyed land itself "Shemamah" – "Desolate". Its names lived up to its reality, as well as its reality up to its names. It was a forsaken and rejected, a desolate and uninhabited waste.

But now God was acting to destroy Babylonia, to liberate Israel from its exile and bondage, and to return it to its old land. With such action, God was giving Israel new names – no longer forsaken but "Hephzibah" – "My Delight Is In Her". No longer desolate, but "Beulah" – "Married"!

Isaiah is intentionally using the metaphor of marriage to describe the new Israel. She is to be a new and restored people – no longer abandoned and rejected, but loved, cherished and married; she has now become to God one in whom God takes great delight.

Then Isaiah concludes, "For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (vs. 5). Here, the prophet uses a metaphor that he also uses in 49:18, 52:1 and 54:11-12. The Israel that God will return from Babylonian exile will be as a bride to God. Jerusalem's reconciliation with Yahweh is like the union between a bride and a groom – a lasting relationship where the two are meant for each other and can find ultimate fulfillment only in each other! Thus, Isaiah is telling the reader that God's love for Jerusalem is unbounded and unconditional, irrespective of the

strains that the earlier relationship endured because of Israel's faithlessness (e.g., see Hosea's earlier proclamation of Israel as a wife who became a whore but whom God will one day restore). God will now receive a chastened Israel back from exile, and they will, once again, be like a newly married bride and groom in their love for one another!

Psalm 36 is intriguing in its structure. Its first four verses deal with the wicked, and what it is that they do that causes them to be considered wicked. One would therefore expect that the next major section of the psalm would deal with the Godly and what they do that causes them to be considered righteous. But that is not what the psalm does at all. Rather, after its description of the iniquity, deceit and mischief of the wicked, the psalm launches into a praise of God.

“Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens; your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life, in your light we see light” (vss. 5-9).

The psalmist rests on God's chesedh love – his grace-filled, forgiving, embracing love of God's people (not the wicked). It is that love that enables “all people to take refuge in the shadow of (God's) wings”. God gives his love to his people that results in love and light to them. “In your light we see light” – or, in other words, God's love, redemptive and transforming work in and among us, builds upon itself in opposition to the wickedness and deceit of those who reject God.

The psalm ends with a prayer to God. “O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart! Do not let the foot of the arrogant tread on me, or the hand of the wicked drive me away. There the evildoers lie prostrate; they are thrust down, unable to rise” (vss. 10-12). That prayer is one of petition for God to continue the impact of chesedh love upon God's people while, at the same time, protecting them from the power of the evildoers. Thus, this psalmist provides the promise to all those who believe in God that God will win and the arrogant will be defeated – and we can operate within that assurance.

John 2:1-11, the Gospel Lesson for the Second Sunday after Epiphany, is the story of Jesus' first miracle – that of turning water into wine – at the marriage feast of some friends in Cana before Jesus began his ministry. The wedding has occurred and the marriage feast that followed it was in full swing when the mother of Jesus, Mary discovers that they are about to run out of wine. She reports the same to Jesus who rather brusquely responds to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” But Mary tells the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do, anyway.

As in any Jewish household hosting a banquet like this, there are stone water jars. Jesus instructs the servants to fill the wine jars with that water and bear it to the steward (or host and supervisor) of the wedding feast. The steward tastes it, declares it the best wine of the banquet and instructs it to be distributed to the guests. Thus, the wedding feast is saved from disaster!

Many simply approach this miracle as Jesus' first miracle – that is, he had to start his ministry with one miracle or another, and this one will do! But that is to miss the strategic importance of this miracle, and what it meant to any Jew listening to this story of Jesus.

As we discovered in the Old Testament Lesson for the Second Sunday of Epiphany (Isaiah 62:1-5), wedding and wedding feast played a significant role in Jewish self-recognition, for it was the metaphor of a wedding and its accompanying banquet which symbolized to Israel its unconditional embrace by God and God's salvation of them. Understood as such, this story of the wedding at Cana is not simply an account of Jesus' first miracle. It is the story that frames for the remainder of the Gospel of John the essential message of its writer. For in this "first" miracle, Jesus is not just a miracle worker that saves a wedding from failure. Rather, his action put Jesus forth as the One who is coming, sent by God ("my hour has not yet come") to turn the old Jewish order ("water") into the new order (new "wine" that is far superior to the "old wine" of the old Jewish order). What are the indicators in this story that it was meant by the gospel writer to frame the entire message of this great book?

The author "sets up" the story by telling the reader that "Jesus and his disciples" had been invited to this wedding feast, and were present. To state that Jesus could be invited with "his disciples" is an indication that he has already selected them, and is thus about to "commence to start to begin" his ministry! His mother then reports to Jesus that the feast is about to run out of wine – a gross blunder of the day, indicating a lack of wise planning on the family's and host's part. Jesus responds to his mother with the rather harsh words, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come" (2:4). Jesus is, in essence, telling Mary to mind her own business, to stop trying to manipulate (or rescue) the situation, and to not push his hand.

But push Jesus' hand Mary does (after all, she *is* a mother)! She tells the servants to do whatever Jesus asks of them, knowing that he will act to rescue this potential embarrassment for his newly married friends and their families. The author now sets up the conditions for the coming miracle by specifically reporting, "Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Judeans¹ rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons" (2:6).

There are three rather remarkable statements in this sentence that would mean little to a reader of today, but would immediately capture the attention of any Jew reading this manuscript two thousand years ago, immediately alerting them that there is far more to this story than an account about Jesus' first miracle. First, it tells us there were "six stone water jars". Second, it tells us that the purpose for these jars was to be used for the "Judeans rites of purification". And third, it tells us that the jars were immense, "each holding twenty to thirty gallons". Given the limited quantity of water needed to perform the "Judeans' rites of purification" (that is, washing the feet and hands of those coming to the wedding feast), the number of jars and the quantity of water they held was all out of proportion to what would be needed even for a wedding feast with hundreds of guests. The author obviously means for the reader to note the absurd abnormality of this sentence. Why would John do this?

¹ The Greek word used here by John is most often translated "Jews", but throughout the book of John, the author clearly uses this word to refer to the Jewish political/religious aristocracy – the Judeans. So I have translated it here with the author's intent that "Jews" be understood, not as the people, but as the "Judeans" of power.

The water jars are meant to be something far greater in this story than being containers of water. What this sentence is meant to do is to prepare the reader for Jesus' first confrontation with the Law as practiced under the rule of the high priests and Pharisees – the Law that John had just written about when he declared, “the Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17). John had made clear in this sentence that the jars were not there at the wedding to provide either water for drinking or for bathing. They were there “for the Jewish rites of purification” – for the keeping of the stipulations of the Law that the Pharisees and priests used to control the actions of the people and to dominate society. The wedding wine had now run out. The Law, as used by the priests and Pharisees to dominate and control the people, was also “running out”. So it was that Jesus would now take the very structures of the Law (the six stone jars) and fill them, not with the water of the Law but with God's new wine by which Jesus would transform this wedding banquet and make it a success!

Jesus simply tells the servants to bear the water-filled jars to the steward of the wedding feast. Acting obediently to Jesus' command (and likely thinking that he was a complete fool), they poured a goblet of this water for the steward to taste. And behold, “the water had become wine” (vs. 9). And not any old wine, at that! The steward declares that this is the most excellent wine of the entire banquet, and commands that it be distributed to the wedding guests.

Now keep in mind that the wedding banquet is used in the Old Testament as a symbol of God's transforming, salvific work among God's people, the wedding itself symbolizing God's union with the people. The Law, as symbolized by stone jars filled only with water, had lost their capacity to bring joy and transformation to Israel. But now, in the hands of Jesus, the Law-laden jars are transformed into vessels of “grace and truth”, dispensing a gospel far superior to the Law used by the Judeans to dominate the people.

This story then ends with the words, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (2:11). John makes it quite clear that this event at the wedding in Cana was not a miracle; it was a “sign”. It was an act that had deep meaning beyond the act itself, an act that was designed to make one think, discuss, and make a decision to follow the Jesus way of “grace and truth” rather than the Judeans' way of an empty Law. It was a “sign” of what God was about to do through Jesus, as presented in the remainder of the Gospel of John. And the author tells us, “And the disciples believed in him!” They saw beyond the act to the sign and, as best they knew how, they embraced that sign and the grace and truth that Jesus was now offering to them. And what about us?

I Corinthians 12:1-11 presents Paul's argument in I Corinthians regarding spiritual gifts. He is writing about such gifts in order to respond to a letter that was sent to him by the Corinthian church as they sought his advice regarding a number of items dealing with church and the Christian life (7:1). The remainder of the book of I Corinthians is essentially Paul's response to these various items (e.g., 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1). Thus, through his introductory words, “Now concerning spiritual gifts” (12:1), Paul is making clear that he has gotten around to this item in the list of concerns about which the Corinthian church has written.

Obviously, the issue of spiritual gifts, and particularly the exercise of one of those gifts (“tongues”) have been creating tension and division within the church. Therefore, what Paul has to say about gifts exercised in the church is important.

Paul begins by presenting the argument that the gifts exercised by members of the church are not just the expression of natural abilities but are literally what they are called: they are “gifts”, not “skills”. One can’t exercise such a gift unless it comes out of that person’s confession that Jesus is Lord (12:3); to use that gift for one’s own self-aggrandizement would be like confessing “Let Jesus be cursed” (vs. 2) – something no authentic Christian can do!

Paul then goes on to point out “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord” (vss. 4-5). The Greek word translated “varieties” is actually better translated “dispersals”. That is, the Spirit has “dispersed” among the people who make up the church the services they need to perform to equip the church for mission in the world and to sustain its life together. And to each person who is called to a unique service, God has dispersed to that person the gifts he or she needs to carry out that service. That is, the gifting each of us receives from God is not for our enhancement or because we are special. Those gifts are purely utilitarian; they have been appropriated to us by God in order to enable us to carry out that service to which God has called each of us.

What is particularly important to understand, Paul continues, is that “it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (vs. 6). And “each (person) is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (vs. 7). The unique ministry (“service”) each of us is given and the gifts adequate to equip us to carry out that ministry have all been given to us by God. And they have been given to us as God’s gift for only one use: to contribute to the building up of the church and its equipping to more effectively act justly in the world.

Our gifts are like grace; Paul suggest. Just as none of us deserves to be saved by God, so none of us deserve the gifts we have. It is all totally utilitarian. God, in his mercy, has chosen to save us (even though we don’t deserve it). Likewise, God, in his mercy, has chosen to use us for the strengthening and equipping of the Body of Christ for mission, giving us the gifts we need to carry out that work (even though we don’t deserve it). It is all grace. From our salvation to our work in Christ’s body, it is all grace! So, don’t “get a big head” over your gifts.

What, then, are some of the gifts God has provided to enable God’s mission to be carried out through the church? Paul now names some of those gifts: wisdom (i.e., discernment, sagacity and judgment), knowledge (i.e., understanding of information, facts, principles and truth), faith, healing of people’s illnesses, working of miracles, prophecy (i.e., telling the truth), discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues (vss. 8-10).

It is important to note that, throughout his letters, Paul makes several lists of “gifts” (e.g., Rom. 12:6-8, I Cor. 12:27-31; I Tim. 4:4). And not all of those “gifts” are listed here. The lists are in no way identical. That means that Paul tailored his listing of gifts to the audience to whom he was writing, most likely listing those gifts most prominently exercised in each respective church.

The one common denominator is that when “tongues” is listed, it is always listed last (12:5, 12:28-30; 14:26). This is likely because, in the context of the Corinthian church, the exercise of “tongues” had become divisive, being used by those who exercised that gift as a mark of their spiritual superiority and to denigrate those who did not use them.

Paul then concludes his response to the Corinthian Christians on gifts with the words, “All these (just-listed gifts) are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses” (vs. 11). The Spirit apportions the various gifts; the people do not. It is the task of each believer to gratefully receive and use that gift allotted to her or him for the building up of the church. Each Christian is not to compare himself or herself to other Christians and their gifts, thus feeling either superior or inadequate. Simply gratefully receive your gift – and humbly use it for Christ and His Kingdom!

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