

2nd Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon 1.19.25

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. ³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." ⁵His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. ⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." ¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. (455)

The stone water jars were empty. The story doesn't say that explicitly, but it does seem to be the case. If they hadn't been empty, Jesus wouldn't have had to tell the servants, "Fill the jars with water."

I don't know why they were empty. It could have been any number of reasons. Maybe the water had been used up; maybe there had been a lot of need for the rite of purification and the demand had left the jars empty and no one had gotten around to filling them. Or maybe they tended to sit empty. Maybe the warm, dry climate made it so sitting water evaporates which made it so no one would leave water sitting around to go to waste. Or maybe this is the Gospel of John saying something significant without really saying it.

This book will do that. It is a book of signs, after all. What is elsewhere called a miracle here is called a sign, an event or occurrence meant to signify something. Not merely meant to

amaze or astonish, and not even really to move people to faith, these were to make people to see as these were signs to point to some higher or deeper truth, the abiding presence of God, the manifest promise of grace upon grace.

Do you see?

We're in the church year that will have us follow the Gospel according to Luke. Year C, the third of three, has us following Luke's synopsis of Jesus' life and ministry, passion and resurrection. But as with each of the three years, so with Luke's year, we'll drop into John's gospel every once in a while, this fourth gospel that's not so much a synopsis of Jesus' life but a series of events, encounters people share with Jesus. These each stand on their own to signify what Jesus was and is in the world, but set together they only barely follow a narrative arc. John's aim, it seems to me, is less to have Jesus develop before our eyes and more to have him arrive fully: the Word of God, the abiding presence of God, in our seeing and so in our hearts.

We made a close study of it recently, a group of us in the churches' book club. And one image that kept coming to me as we encountered Jesus according to John, who encountered many characters along the way through the book, is from a movie version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the Muppet version, I'll admit.

Okay, give me a minute. I am a Muppet kid. I was six years old when *The Muppet Show* first aired on TV. I was nine years old when *The Muppet Movie* was in theaters. I've had a life-long understanding, first fostered by my parents, that the Muppets are up to something far more sophisticated than you might think.

And *The Muppet Christmas Carol* is the Muppets at their finest. The Ghost of Christmas Present is puppetry at its finest, though also at its most technically mysterious. A very big puppet for a very garrulous character, the Ghost of Christmas Present filled the streets of tiny Victorian, Muppet London, and would never be able to fit into tiny Tudor Muppet homes. But through puppetry magic, the character could shrink: his whole self and even his big wild coat and boots and fringe and beard could funnel down in size and enter tiny spaces. The character arrived big and colorful and friendly and, to enter the homes where he had to bring Scrooge so Scrooge could see what Christmas is like for most people, those *not* cruel and miserly, this Ghost-puppet could accommodate whatever cramped place, not by squeezing himself or peeking in or poking in one finger or one foot, but by fully becoming the size needed while never losing any of his goofy, garrulous grandeur.

It's quite a thing to watch and I have no idea the technicalities of making it happen but the effect on screen is a character who can accommodate whatever receptacle is there to receive him while never sacrificing any part of himself, never leaving any part of himself out in the act of accommodation. There's a beautiful generosity to it and consideration. It implies gracious self-knowing on the spirit's part and a sense of responsibility to the other.

Watching Jesus according to John meet people where they were, share an encounter with this person or that person in the most ordinary ways while also presenting the abiding grandeur and mystery of God always put me in mind of that Muppet—

as here, Jesus a guest at this wedding, a guest like any other. And there must have been many since they'd drunk all the wine and had the hosts suddenly come up empty.

This might well be the most well-known of Jesus' miracles, Jesus' signs, turning water into wine. But the familiarity might have us not see what's also strange about this whole scene. Jesus, a guest at this wedding along with his mother, likely invited because that's how weddings were then in that culture. They were enormous festivals, lasting as long as a week, and inclusive of everyone who lived in the area, which, this being Cana of Galilee, wasn't far from where Jesus lived, Nazareth seven miles away, a day's journey. As such, the hosts of a wedding would be sure to have enough wine, even if not such good wine, at least not after the first round.

But at this wedding the wine ran dry, which Jesus' mother seemed to think Jesus could do something about.

Jesus himself wasn't so convinced: "What concern is that to you and to me," he asked and then noted this apparent non sequitur, "for my hour has not yet come."

Except it seems it had. Or at least Mary seems to think it had, that here, now was the perfect moment for showing the world what it looks like: grace upon grace.

That it was the third day might have awakened her to that fact, though what this meant in the context of story-time isn't clear. It's said that the wedding took place on the third day, which is likely in reference to the count-up of days that moved us through the first chapter of this gospel, a counting up that makes sense in the context of this as a piece of theological literature but not so much as a series of events the characters in the story lived and were aware of themselves as living.

It begins in the beginning, this gospel does, with talk of cosmology and Christ, with the Word in the beginning being with God and indeed being God. It steps into time with talk of John, the one who would herald the coming Christ, and then it appears fully in time with John baptizing. The next day, the story says, has us again with John who, upon seeing Jesus walk by,

announced him as the Lamb of God. And then the next day, the story says, we are again with John, who was now standing with two of his disciples when he noticed Jesus once again nearby and whom he again announced as the Lamb of God, which made his two disciples turn now to follow Jesus. And then on the third day, the story notes, we're in Cana at the wedding.

On the third day.

This count-up of days should evoke to us the creation story in Genesis when each day was imagined as ushering in a new threshold of being in the creation, and a renewal of the declared goodness of the creation. The Gospel of John situates itself very much within that on-going work of creation, work that's not complete, that hasn't yet reached its 7th day of rest, but that's yet coming into completion. Indeed, in this Gospel, Jesus speaks of this being the cause for his coming, that is, to do the works of the Father, to complete the works of the Father.

But this event being itself on the third day, this occurrence, a shortfall at a wedding, not enough of that which should be poured out, this shortfall that indeed inaugurates his time having come should evoke to us that other grand thing to happen on the third day, the Resurrection of Jesus, his rising to eternal life and revealing to all abundant life, life that has no end or better to say life whose end is life. Grace upon grace, you might even say, a gracious pouring out of grace, no shortfall here.

Just so, John's gospel begins with a vision of the end, an *experience* of the end. This is where we're headed with this story John's about to tell: to a wedding feast where the wine is flowing. This is where we're going when we follow Christ, to endless celebration, to endless joy, where high spirits pour out with no end but itself.

All that Jesus would need to manifest this vision is for someone to fill up those empty jars. Those enormous cisterns! And I don't know why they were empty. But I have a suspicion of what their emptiness might have meant to our gospel writer, how this emptiness might have been understood as significant.

The community for whom this gospel was written, the community indeed from whom this gospel was written, was one that had been put to exile by their home villages, their home communities. Each member of the so-called Johannine community had likely come from devout Jewish homes and synagogues and villages. Yet these were people who'd departed from Jewish practice. In their coming to believe in Jesus, in their coming to see in Jesus the manifest presence of the eternal God, they departed from the way and were indeed forced to depart from their households and communities.

Because there are some things that can't be both/and. There are some things in life that are decisive, indeed are divisive. To believe one thing means not to believe another. To live in one way means not to live in another. This is a hard truth for people like us. We value open-mindedness. We value compromise, finding that middle way. We even look for the chance to have it both ways, to have our cake and eat it too. But many are the things in life where that's simply not possible, that to have it both ways is actually to have it neither way.

Believing in Jesus is something you do or you don't, and it's determinative of a lot, the many things that flow from it. To live or not to live by the Jewish law, to continue to honor or to forgo the many Jewish practices. I remember seeing the play *The Amish Project*, about the Amish community that suffered a school shooting and that, resilient as it was, offered forgiveness to the shooter though now deceased, offered forgiveness also to the shooter's family.

And it put on full display the source and cost of that resilience, which is its tight-knit, exclusive, and very rule-bound way. With the Amish, you're either in or you're out, and you either benefit from that resilience or it is resilience at the expense of your not being a beneficiary of it. Young adults brought up Amish have a year outside the community to decide are they in or are they out, and what a decisive decision it is.

Following the play, there was a "Q & A," a time for the audience to ask questions of the actors, director, and the playwright who was there. One person waved her hand with a question. Someone like me, seemed like, an educated, open-minded northeasterner, she asked, "How did they manage to forgive so graciously?" and then "Why are they so strict about their community membership?" and my thought was that the one is because of the other and the other is because of the one. Their clear, indeed strict, sense of membership and rule-boundedness means that they're resilient when it comes to facing off the outside world, even when it crashes in on them, that if they were any more fluid as to who's in and who's out they'd probably be a lot more reactive and lot less resilient. When it comes to stuff like this, you really can't have it both ways.

The members of the Johannine community had discovered that, when it comes to stuff like this, you can't have it both ways. And their previous way was no longer their way, had become rather like cisterns empty of their ritual elements. This new way, this new seeing, came to them as truth, a pouring forth of grace, a fullness that they couldn't deny even though it cost them dear.

I sometimes ask myself what rituals in my life that were once full have become now empty, what vessels once to contain a thing of significance need to be filled with something new.

Sometimes I wake up in the morning so happy to receive another day. Sometimes I wake up in the morning weary that it's time to do it all again.

There is much in our world that demands our energy and our hope, that benefits from our being full of God's grace. The hour has come for such fullness to pour forth. Fill your jar here.

Thanks be to God.