

2nd Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon 1.16.22

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)

Not everyone has the same idea of a good time, a *joyful* time—joy as that flash of eternity that illuminates time.

That's Christian Wiman's take on joy, poet Christian Wiman. "Joy is a flash of eternity that illuminates time."

Remember those flashes? Have you had any recently, any flash of eternity to help you move through this time? I think I've had only a very few lately, only a couple last year, a couple the year before. The last time I *really* had one I was on an overnight getaway with Tobias and Jack and one of their friends, Teagan.

This was maybe four weeks before everything shut down in 2020. We went to Killington, them to ski, me to work in the lodge, us all to stay the night so they could get fresh tracks in the morning. They were on their February break from school.

We stayed in the only place we could find that didn't cost about \$1,000 a night, a crooked little place in a drive-through village whose big boast was that Calvin Coolidge had been born there. We were impressed—once we'd Googled Calvin Coolidge. The information came slowly. Cell service was iffy.

The inn itself had been there since at least Calvin's birth and was up to date in meeting building code provided the regulations hadn't changed since. No one was there to meet us. There was just a key left out for us in an otherwise empty inn, empty at least as far as we could tell—an empty inn amidst a snowy village on a cold night in winter-dark Vermont. Teagan said in unpacking the car, "Oh my God, we're all going to die."

In the dining area, there was a note near a stack of dishes that read, "Please wash your dishes before putting them away." Using dishes for our grocery-store prepared dinner, we washed them before putting them away—but in the morning. Once we were safely tucked in our room, I, for one, wasn't about to leave.

The kids, though, took the opportunity that night to make a horror movie trailer, as was their wont to do. Using their iPhones, they filmed in darkened corners and tucked away nooks deep into the creaking night while I fell asleep on an old twin bed.

I was thrilling as I fell asleep. The whole thing was so spontaneous and off-kilter and unexpected, done in a spirit of, "Let's venture out and see what we find," and full of some of my favorite people, young weirdos who could always make me laugh and for whom life seemed like one grand expanse of surprisingly possibility.

That was *then*, am I right?

But maybe this isn't your idea of a good time.

In Jesus' day, a good time was a wedding.

That's still true today, sometimes, for some people. Some weddings just overflow with joy.

This wedding in Cana had overflowed with joy, and from this moment on would only more so.

The wine was nearing gone. Two days into this celebration, the wine was running low, as you might predict. When a celebration goes this long, its provisions will run dry. So, they were here, nearing gone, until, on the third day...

Which should perk our ears, should perk our hearing: "On the third day..."

We're in the Gospel of John with this story. Taking a break from our regular gospel narrative for the year, the Gospel of Luke, now, for this Sunday, we're in the Gospel of John,

which means we can't read anything for just its plain meaning. We must always be listening for a deeper meaning, or a higher meaning, a more encompassing seeing. John's gospel operates in the time of the narrative and also beyond the time of the narrative, to some more complete understanding of what it's all about. John's gospel works with an understanding of how this will end—Jesus glorified, first raised on the cross, then raised to the right hand of the Father. There is little of surprise in this gospel narrative—and when you read a story knowing of its end, your reading is different, often more full. That sense of an ending: it lends light to the on-going.

This is the importance of eschatology in Christian living. This is the importance of having a sense of the ending when it comes to life amidst this creation of God's. That it ends in glory, that it ends in praise, that it ends in everlasting joy: to have this sense of the end of all things means to live amidst the on-going of all things is to be charged with hope, charged with energy for manifesting that joy, that glory now.

There was a time in the life of the mainline church when we let go this sense of an ending. Eschatology was a little too "out there" for the church in the time of the dominance of the Modern Man in the Modern West, mid- to late- 20th century. Then, the prospect of everything continuing on as it is into eternity was itself a comfort. Then, things were pretty good.

I, though, have never been a Modern Man. I want to know what all this is *for*, and I'm not so enamored of my own efforts and accomplishments.

For what it's worth, I'm convinced this is part of the pain of this pandemic: we don't know how it ends, so we can't know its true meaning. It's just on-going. It's just on-going. And this makes it all so ripe for confusion and misunderstanding and even misinformation and even disinformation. A need for meaning, a search for meaning, has lots of people in a mindset that is all but lost: a putting together of information to create a picture that is crazed with conspiracy but has no truth.

John's gospel operates with a knowing of where this is going, and he writes for an audience that also knows where this is going, and writes of Jesus as someone who has known all along where he is going (the cross) and moreover why (because of the crucial power, the *divine* power, of self-giving love) though he speaks among people who don't know, who don't know. They follow just in trust.

They follow also because it starts in joy, at a wedding. It starts, indeed, as it will end, in joy. And it's not for nothing that Jesus is spoken of as the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, as if how this begins so it will end. In joy.

See, in this way, it's an ironic text, animated by dramatic irony. Here, there's what the characters in the story seem to know and then what the readers of the story are understood to know, which the writer or teller of the story moreover knows isn't necessarily the same thing. So, "...on the third day..." The people in this story aren't thinking about the significance of what happens "on the third day," but we the readers should well be thinking of the significance of what happens (for what happened) "on the third day."

Here's what happens on the third day: the resurrection, Jesus rising to the life that has no end, or better to say rising to the life whose end is life.

True, this isn't how the Gospel of John remembers it, is more how two of the synoptic Gospels speak of it, how they speak of Jesus speaking of it. In two of those three—in Matthew and Luke, though not in Mark and not in John—Jesus is three times narrated to have spoken of his resurrection just so: "...on the third day, he will rise..." "...on the third day, he will be raised..." So, what happens on the third day is this: the resurrection, the birth into a life that is joy abounding, the birth into a life that is beyond death, beyond tears and weeping, beyond pain and grieving, beyond fear, beyond fear.

This is to say, 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.

Not everyone experiences alcohol as such, not in the world we now inhabit. Wine has never been my friend like this, neither when I drank a lot of it, nor now when I hardly do at all. But as metaphor, I can get with it, and hope you can too.

An endless celebration with high spirit pouring forth.

Now as to the getting there, as to the getting to this end that is endless joy. That road will bring us through a lot of terrain that is painfully, painfully other than joy.

It had been a long journey until now, many centuries long. The people had journeyed through time with their God, the Lord whose first call to them came as a revelation, a burning bush in the wilderness, a bush burning though never consumed, some spirited sustaining of itself, life feeding off life, nothing spent to ash, nothing laid to waste or made to die that life might live. Moses saw it, Moses heard it, the voice from this bush saying, "Go to my people, the ones who are oppressed and subjugated and exploited and enslaved. Go and gather them and lead them out."

We think of them as already a people, already a bloodline. They weren't, or maybe they weren't. They were a class of people, an *underclass* of people. Like enslaved Black people in America, these weren't all related to one another in terms of blood. Their overlords had made them a people, and then God called them as a people to come out, to come north, to band together so to defy and withstand and rise and get out.

The wilderness.

The given Law—this way of life, and moreover life together.

The people fought for land—and won it.

The people fought to defend their land, and won, and then lost.

Centuries passed. The Temple was built, was sacked, was built again. The ancient practices generated, were generous, and then were merely pro forma, or were a way for the power structure to maintain itself. Forms that give life can become mere formalities, ceremony without spirit.

This happens.

This is one of the spookiest things I've ever heard that I think is also real. In North Korea, in Pyongyang, there are traffic girls, pretty young women who've been chosen from the populace for their prettiness and physical precision. They've been taught the expressive art of directing traffic. They stand in the streets and move their arms, their bodies, to direct cars through the city's intersections. This all began in the early 80s, when traffic in North Korea was hardly a thing. This elaborate dance, this practiced discipline to direct traffic that wasn't there. It was the display of bustling life, a pretending at hustle and bustle, but there was no hustle and bustle.

There is now, more so anyway, but partly because the traffic girls themselves are a tourist attraction—the spooky purposelessness of what they're doing, the eerie denial as they are not living as they believe.

The stone water jars at the wedding feast were empty, as if now an empty form. Enormous cisterns for holding water that would serve to make people ritually clean and therefore fit for some sacred act, they were empty now. In a plain sense, the water was perhaps used up by all the wedding guests who, over the course of this celebration, had used it for its purpose, to clean themselves so they'd all be fit for participation in the sacred act of wedding a couple. In the more ironic sense, the water had been used over these long centuries of ancient practice and had now run dry, the practice now mere formality, no longer a conduit for spirit or holiness. It happens even to the most exalted of rites: they can become drained and dry and merely pro forma, a pretending at something and little more.

Jesus would fill these jars with a something altogether new. What's more, he'd fill them with something less insistent on some stubborn fact that people are constitutionally and essentially *unclean*, and are therefore ever in need of some formal means to become clean, if but fleetingly so. No, he'd fill these cisterns with a substance insistent that God is sufficient for reaching us, God's grace is sufficient for making up where we fall short and God's invitation into celebration is without condition or caveat.

We're fine as we are. We're *fine*. We could be better. But we're fine. Yes, whereas the old way starts from an assumption that people aren't okay as they are this new way starts from a place of God's grace being enough.

God is doing a new thing here—and he saved the best for this late moment in time.

Why?

We don't know. But now was the time., Now was the moment.

And we must be careful here. We Christians must be careful here as the story operates with a strong supersessionist conviction. This is to say that John's gospel has a strong need to reject the old way, to embrace the new, to reject what we'd now call Jewish practice in favor of this less formal, less ritualized, more plain abiding in Christ, abiding in beloved community.

Supersessionism. The church triumphant. Ours is the right way and Jewish ways are wrong, or at least are no longer right. This is the posture the church has often taken, and we have been wrong to do so. It's a misguiding reading of things, often even an evil reading of things, and it largely comes from this gospel narrative.

But, listen, our writer has come into his supersessionism honestly, as have the communities for which "John" first wrote. These were people who'd been driven out of their synagogues, driven out of their villages. These are people whose families had rejected them and whose elders had persecuted them.

We must read the Gospel of John in this light.

Whatever anti-Jewish sentiment is here isn't ours to take up. No Jews have ever persecuted us. No Jewish practice has ever played out unjustly on us. Old enmity should often simply be laid to rest, like now, like with this old enmity, which is simply madness now.

That said, Jesus here is truly inaugurating something new—a new religious practice (which is nearly *no* religious practice but is merely religious faith). Jesus here, according to John, is truly inaugurating a new theological conviction—that God simply wants to celebrate with us, that the Lord God simply wants us to celebrate with him, at the fact of life, at the saving fact of love, at the

bewildering truth that death has no hold in life, and that the powers and principalities who deal in death are powerless in all their power, will come to nothing when faced with self-giving love.

John's gospel begins at a celebration because it ends in celebration—and the pouring forth of high spirit at this event is what will sustain us we who journey with Jesus to the cross and through the cross. These are what will help us endure.

Think on those moments of joy in your life, whatever the cause of them, whatever the event that brought a flash of eternity as if to illuminate your time. Think on them, and treasure them in your hearts.

Such things might be hard to come by these days. Such sparks for joy might be few and far between. But they are forever.

Thanks be to God.