

Epiphany 2, January 17, 2016. Isaiah 62:1-5 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 John 2:1-11  
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I remember at my brother's wedding reception – in a beautiful old English country mansion – that when it came to the wedding toast we seemed short of champagne! Turned out later that some of the waiters were stealing it! Still, we did have champagne for the toast!

And while the wine that was served “on the front end” – as the reception began – was good, it wasn't as good as the champagne.

Have you been to a wedding like that? Not, I mean, one where the waiters were stealing the good wine, but one where the very best wine was served some way into the reception? That's not unusual, is it?! I think that's why the wedding at Cana is so different from normal 1<sup>st</sup> Century Peasant weddings in Judea.

Families wanted to be generous, but money was, no doubt, short. So you served the good wine first, when peoples' palates were more discriminating, then the cheaper wine when their sense of taste was dulled somewhat.

That's the setting for this wedding – in Cana, just a few miles from Nazareth – in Jesus' back yard – probably a wedding of a relative.

This is the very first time we hear of Jesus after calling disciples – John says it was “the first sign.” The first moment when you stop and say, “wait a minute, something's different here!”

A wedding, yes – but a coming-out party too! The beginning of something new.

There's a bit of a play on symbols here: yes, the wedding is about vessels – large amphorae – but the wedding *is* a vessel: a container for the introduction to “the greatest story ever told.”

Amphora held about 30 gallons each, and there were, according to John, six of them. That's 180 gallons of wine. Given the poverty of the time (meaning you'd invite fewer guests because you couldn't afford a large wedding) and the fact that Jesus and his social circle were peasants – the wedding wouldn't have been large - maybe no more than 50 guests. Undoubtedly some of them were children. So assume 5 gallons per guest!!

That's an outrageous amount! Or, I should say, that's an outrageous amount if this is the story about having enough wine at a 1<sup>st</sup> Century wedding.

Thing is, this is not the story of having enough wine at a 1<sup>st</sup> Century wedding! It's about the story that lies at the heart of the Jewish scriptures – the Covenant-Promises of God. The message is that a New Promise has just been inaugurated with new wine – huge amounts of wine – wine of the highest quality – nothing cheap for God!

They were intended – as everyone hearing or reading this story would have known – for purification rites.

John tells us what's new through the water and the wine. The water is for purification – it represents the Old Covenant that was based on purity – the new wine is for celebration. This one moment and transition is a metaphor for the whole of Jesus' public ministry, where he constantly rejects the rule-bound purity that always excludes for the love-bound celebration that always unites.

Weddings are, in my experience, one of those times in our lives when doubt, fear, pain, sorrow, are dismissed, and we get as close to pure happiness as is possible this side of the river. And we know without having to be told that weddings mark a new beginning. And it's a new beginning that has significant consequences. In a wedding a new community is created – not just with “two people becoming one” but two families becoming one community.

Do we recognize this new community of which we're a part? It's easy to find things going stale when we don't pay attention to the constant need for every community to refresh itself, to work intentionally to allow the newness of God's Spirit to permeate our core identity. The gospel passage invites us into that journey, into that refreshing work, into that intentionality.

In the Epistle for today Paul helps us understand what sort of community is created by this new covenant of joyful abundance. For Paul as for many human beings, the experience of adversity provokes clarity, and Paul's clarity is eloquent.

The New Covenant Community, he says, is one with diverse gifts, but the community comes first, the gifts come second. The gifts are important only when they contribute to the common good.

In Corinth those gifts weren't contributing to the common good. The Corinthians' rugged individualism was threatening to dismember the Body of Christ. For us this is a cautionary tale – this country was founded by rugged individualists and that self-focused spirit permeates American identity.

Can we – as a part of the Body of Christ – overcome the impulse toward individualism and focus on the uniting communal identity of the Body?

Isaiah identifies community as central to a faith-filled religious identity. When community is healthy, it will be given a new name reflective of the joy in God's heart, hence “My Delight Is In Her.”

The Corinthian community, Paul says, can be such a community only if the Corinthian Christians recognize that most basic of human truths – *we need each other*. It really doesn't matter who has what gifts, only that we're willing to use those gifts for the building up of the community.

In the end our gifts are not our own, says Paul, they are “charismata” - gifts from God that belong to God. Our gifts only matter – just as our faith only matters – when they're about relationships

in which other people matter most.

The real sign of the Spirit of God is not the ability to sustain spiritual “highs”, or that we appear to be devout, or that we work hard for the kingdom, but only, only in as far as the presence of love and compassion of God in our lives is obvious.

That’s a message that’s true in every time and place, including ours.

Our gifts come from God, and they’re only of value when we use them for the common good – for the community of God; not to promote our own agenda, not to make ourselves the center of attention. When we’re not vehicles for compassion we’re simply a distraction, or even a hindrance to the gospel.

The invitation for us – who are the members of the Body of Christ – is to hold that vision of love and compassion at the center of our own community – it’s the only way we can actually **be** a community of faith.

Only then will we gain entry into the great celebration of God’s abundance prefigured in the Wedding at Cana.                      Amen.

