

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, 1.20.19, Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 36:5-10, I Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11

Sermon Resources:

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=501

<http://words.dancingwiththeword.com/2013/01/on-wine-and-weddings.html>

<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/01/the-sign-of-hour.html>

Interpreter's Bible Commentary: "Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs/Isaiah/Jeremiah"

Interpreter's Bible Commentary: "Corinthians/Galatians/Ephesians"

Bruce Malina, Richar Rohrbaugh, "Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John"

John's gospel is sometimes contrasted with the gospel according to Mark, with the assessment that Mark has a very human Jesus, while John shows us a more transcendent, deified Jesus. Which is a fair assessment, but it's interesting that even in a gospel known for a sort of super human portrayal of Jesus, we get this very down-to-earth story of him attending a wedding with his mother. That's a very human thing to do. And it remains a very human situation, up until the point when the wine runs out, which would have been a cultural disgrace. Weddings in Jesus' time were a community event, and in the weeks leading up to it, as a sign of support and friendship, guests and well-wishers would send gifts to the families to help them put on a feast, gifts like wine. So, as one commentator put it, lack of wine could indicate lack of friends. And even if that wasn't true, which we don't know about whoever's wedding this was, it was the perception which mattered, it looked disgraceful if you ran out of wine at your wedding.

So, Jesus' mother comes and tells him this, and at first he's unphased, what has that to do with you or me? But she turns to the servants and prepares them for his instructions, which she seems to believe he will provide, and then he moves into the realm of the superhuman. He has them fill up huge stone jars, I mean gallons and gallons, with water, and surely that must have been perplexing, like...

we're out of wine, Jesus, the water situation is fine. But they do it, and then he says to offer some to the steward of the banquet, the one overseeing the wine, and when they do, what he tastes is the best wine he's ever had, for which he offers his compliments, not to Jesus, but to the bridegroom.

The text tells us that the chief steward doesn't know where the amazing wine came from. Neither, it seems, does the bridegroom. Nobody else seems to realize the disaster which has just been averted, or realizes the fullness of the miracle that has happened. Quietly, unobtrusively, behind-the-scenes, Jesus performs this sign. Quietly, unobtrusively, behind-the-scenes, the servants carry out his instructions. But in doing so, Jesus is able to support and lift up this bridegroom and the wedding and foster joy and celebration, rather than disgrace. And by noticing what Jesus did, what the servants did on his orders, his disciples get to see a sign of his glory and believe in him even more.

Eudora Welty's novel "Delta Wedding", follows a similar idea. The titular wedding occupies all of one page in the novel, the actual marrying of two people is one sentence in the entire book. But the rest of the novel is the week leading up to and the time after and all that happened to prepare and what occurs after this wedding, because it is that part of the story which matters in the novel. The same is true in our gospel text. Basically, this miracle happened behind-the-scenes, back in the kitchen, backstage, around the edges of this wedding celebration. This is not big or obvious or flashy. It's circumspect and simple and quiet and unobtrusive. And yet it is this off-to-the-sides event which is the most important for us as people of faith. John's gospel doesn't care whose wedding it was, who exactly was there, why the wine ran out, John cares about what Jesus did around the edges of it.

We hear the same kind of theme in our I Corinthians passage. Now, if you've ever read or studied the Corinthian letters you know things are not as peaceful as they seem in this part of the letter—the Corinthians are a mess, and Paul really lays

into them at some points. And even here, the issue is that they've taken to valuing some spiritual gifts over others, valuing the "best" ones like prophecy and speaking in tongues, leading to further division in their community of faith. So Paul is listing off all these spiritual gifts, but saying it is the same Lord who is served, the one Spirit who gives them, the one body connected in them. And some of the spiritual gifts he lists are unobtrusive, not flashy ones, the ones that might take place or exist on the edges, behind the scenes, as preparation. Things like knowledge, like wisdom. Things like faith.

Certainly we have spiritual gifts today, from the one Spirit, to serve the one Lord, binding us all together. But some of our spiritual gifts might be the kind that are like knowledge, wisdom, faith, like others you could think of, that are quiet, unobtrusive, not flashy, that take place behind the scenes or before the action starts, gifts that are used and occur on the edges, to prepare and uplift in other ways.

The thing is, we might have those kinds of gifts, and then resent that we're not noticed. We might resent not getting praised, not getting praised enough, or often enough. We know we're supposed to value all of them, and we know that not flashy, "at the edges" kind of gifts are just as valuable as prophecy or tongues, but we see that attention and praise, and so maybe we start to use our gifts, to do service and offer our gifts, in order to get praise. And then we feel resentful when it doesn't come, or it doesn't come often enough or in the way we'd like.

And, I do need to clarify here that I'm not saying we need to accept abuse or poor treatment, that we need to just accept our lot and never work for anything better, I am not saying that we ought not work for equality and acceptance and valuing humanity, we absolutely should. But, and there's really no way around this message, if we're using our gifts in order to be loved, in order to be praised, and feeling resentful about it, then we have to adjust our attitude. That's what Paul is telling the Corinthians, and that's the only way we'll really be following and

serving Jesus with our spiritual gifts. We've got to adjust our attitude if we are doing things to be noticed or to get rewards or to satisfy some need in ourselves.

And we need that attitude adjustment because we are not using our gifts for ourselves, we are using our gifts for more than ourselves. In our Isaiah passage it describes the relationship between God and God's people like a marriage relationship, and that in renewing that relationship, God's people will be like adornment for God, glorifying and beautifying God. And, absolutely this is meant to be a metaphor and not taken too far, but what it's saying, basically, is that God has a relationship with God's people, and the people's lives and worship and connection are meant to glorify God. Which is true of our spiritual gifts, they show our relationship to God, they are meant to glorify God, and strengthen our bonds in Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ, in the gospel, has a relationship with these people whose wedding he is attending, he somehow knows them, he has a connection just as much as God has a connection with God's people, and Jesus uses that connection and his gifts to uplift them, to further their joy, to spare them disgrace, to demonstrate the glory of God here in their kitchen. And he does it without gaining praise for himself, or calling attention to it.

Our spiritual gifts are a sign of our connection to God, and not a way for us to earn praise or love or get gold stars, they are a way to adorn the Lord, to glorify and uplift God here on earth, and a way for us to strengthen our connections and uplift other people. They are a way, even, maybe especially, in the quietest and most unobtrusive ways, to spare disgrace and further joy.

The other thing about John's story is that Jesus does something behind the scenes, but it's preparing for something bigger. Jesus says to his mother what is that to you and me, my hour has not yet come. And Jesus isn't thinking about the clock, he's thinking about his glory, about his purpose and full identity, which aren't ready to be completely revealed yet. It's not the right time. But he can do

something, something quiet, something behind the scenes, something off to the side, which prepares for the greater revelation which is coming. He's laying the groundwork, preparing for what is ahead.

Sometimes with our wonderful spiritual gifts, in our intentions to serve, in our plans, in our mission, in our projects, we want things to happen right now, we are ready for it to happen right this second. And sometimes we assume that because *I'M* ready for something to happen now, that everybody should be ready, everyone should operate on my timetable. But Jesus has a deeper awareness of time, knows that his hour has not yet come, and so he can't reveal everything yet, but he can start small, he can do something unobtrusive, behind the scenes, he can lay the ground work and prepare for the bigger revelation, the bigger plans ahead.

It's the same for us with our gifts. Sometimes it's not the time yet, sometime there is groundwork which still needs to be laid, sometimes we need to do the smaller, the quieter, the off to the side and behind the scenes work first, in order to prepare. And this work is just as important as the big plans, the big actions, the big revelations still to come. Like preparing your lesson plan in advance of teaching a class, like measuring and outlining and leveling before you build a house, like brainstorming and sharing ideas first, like setting up or cleaning an area so it's ready to be used, like buying the ingredients and preparing the surfaces before cooking, any number of ways that our gifts can be used not to make something happen right now, or demand that other people be ready before they are, but to prepare the way, to lay the groundwork, unobtrusively and behind the scenes.

The flip side is it's important for all of us to notice when other people are using their gifts in behind the scenes ways, using gifts that we might not obviously have noticed. Because in the gospel, the disciples who noticed what happened behind the scenes, who noticed the servants' actions, who listened to Jesus'

commands off to the side, they were the ones who saw this early revelation and it strengthened their belief in Jesus, it strengthened their faith.

Sometimes we don't notice. And that's not just a product of our cultural age or our chronological age. People of all ages and times in history overlooked the quiet, unobtrusive, behind the scenes work which prepared the way. But we don't want to miss someone's spiritual gift, we don't want to miss a quieter revelation.

In the Harry Potter books, for example, while the concept of house elves, creatures who cook and clean and keep houses running, is introduced pretty early on, it isn't until the 4th book that the main characters realize that all the time they were living in the castle, it was being cared for, their meals being prepared, the day to day work being kept operational by scores of house elves living there. Now, they have the excuse in the story of assuming that it's some kind of magic, but still, they had never noticed that behind-the-scenes, unobtrusive, preparatory kind of service to them.

We don't have the excuse of assuming magic is keeping things running, and yet still, sometimes, we overlook and don't notice the less flashy spiritual gifts, the service being offered behind the scenes, the preparation and work that went in to keep things running. Often we don't notice until it disappears: when someone doesn't prepare for us, when the service stops, when people aren't able to do the jobs we've come to depend on, it's only then that we notice their work and gifts, it's only then that we're faced with what we've assumed would happen, what we've taken for granted all this time.

So, it's important for us, as people of faith, to notice, and not just when it stops. To notice people's quieter gifts, to notice the preparation and care that goes before us, to notice what's going on behind the scenes and off to the sides and on the edges of our lives. It's important for us to notice, because in those places that

we see the beginnings of revelation, when we notice, we get to see yet another piece of Jesus' presence here, another part of his body here on earth.

So, in those times when our own gifts have gone overlooked and undervalued, how can we adjust our attitudes? How we can adjust so that we are using our gifts and offering our service in ways that glorify and adorn God, in ways that reveal the Lord's presence, in ways that point to the larger body of Christ, in ways that are unassuming? And in what ways can we lay the groundwork and prepare with our gifts, behind the scenes? How we can adjust our expectations so that we see unobtrusive and behind the scenes gifts as groundwork and groundbreaking for things to come? And how can we better notice and pay attention and show our appreciation for people whose gifts are shared and whose service is offered behind the scenes, off to the side, in preparation and around the edges of our lives?

Let's not use our gifts or offer our service as a way to gain praise and attention for ourselves. Let's offer it to glorify God, and connect with each other in the body of Christ. Let's not rush too quickly before it is time, let's not jump in without having prepared. Let's use our gifts and offer our service to lay the groundwork and prepare for greater revelations. Let's watch for those quieter signs and behind-the-scenes revelations. Let's take the time to notice and pay attention to those gifts of the spirit which are unobtrusive and quiet and keep our world going, let's take the time to notice and pay attention to those people offering their gifts and service behind the scenes, around the edges, preparing for what's to come. Let's use our gifts, and notice each other's gifts, as we glorify the Lord and prepare the way for Jesus Christ. Amen.