

# Take Another Look!

A sermon based on John 2:1-11 and 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

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The recent ice storm put a dent in some of the best-laid plans of brides and men. A Montreal couple, expecting to get married on January 10, saw six months of careful arrangements and planning put in jeopardy by the storm. Love won out, however, and despite the fact that the church in which the wedding took place was a mite chilly, and that the guests wore boots and coats, and worse, that many of the guests because of power outages hadn't showered, the wedding took place as planned.

There were some adjustments, of course, given the unexpected weather. The church, without power, had to use candlelight, and the presiding minister cut his usual 20-minute sermon down to three minutes because the bride, in her backless, ivory lace gown, was shivering, but the wedding took place, despite a host of unexpected elements. For one thing, the bride almost didn't make it to the church; the car that was supposed to pick her up got stuck in an icy driveway. A van sent as a back-up didn't have enough gas to reach the church. The bride's hairdresser wasn't able to keep the appointment made by the bride, and the bride had to make do with a cordless curling iron. The food prepared for the reception was spoiled and had to be replaced with some hastily scrounged frozen foods; and the disc jockey hired for the dance failed to show—BUT—said the groom, "It's true we didn't get to have a big fairy-tale wedding with a big head table and music. But it was magic just the same." (Karen Seidman, "Cold feet not enough to stop storm wedding," Ottawa Citizen, week of January 13, 1998)

## An unexpected wedding gift

Weddings, of course, are renowned for the unexpected. Perhaps because people get so persnickety about things going "just right," they often go "so wrong!" I can't tell any of my own wedding stories because most of those implicated are here this morning, but it's not only members of the wedding party who slip up, clergy themselves make their share of mistakes. One Winnipeg minister solemnly intoned, before a serious couple, that "what man hath put together, let no god tear asunder!" Another minister arrived at a wedding, only to find all members of the wedding party dressed up as characters from Star Trek! I think I would have told them to "beam off," thank you very much. It's not accidental that Steve Martin's movie, "Father of the Bride," was rather popular; weddings are a treasure trove for disaster, and comedy.

I don't know if anyone was laughing at the wedding Jesus and his mother attended in Cana (John 2), but there too the wedding plans went awry. The wine ran out! They fared much better in those days without electrical power, but wedding feasts were big celebrations in the life of a Jewish community, and wine, long considered synonymous with joyful occasions, was considered essential to the celebration.

First-century weddings feasts were extended occasions; it was like a week-long Open House with guests constantly coming and going. The wedding couple wore crowns and were treated like king and queen. In a life where there was much poverty and a lot of hard work, this week of marital festivity and joy was one of the supreme occasions of one's life.

If the wedding party in Cana was disturbed by this unexpected turn of events, they were also the recipients of a quite unexpected wedding gift! Off in a corner were six stone jars holding water used for the Jewish rites of purification. Each jar held twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus asked

those catering the wedding to top off the jars, which they did, filling them to the brim, whereupon he instructed them to take a sample to the chief steward. The chief steward, stressed out by the embarrassment he had caused the wedding party and his master, distractedly took a sip, no doubt expecting to taste water, but the liquid in his mouth had an unmistakably fermented taste! It was wine! In fact, truth be told, it was wine superior in quality to the one he had been serving the past several hours.

A little girl who was told this Bible story was asked, "What do you think this story teaches us?" To which she replied, "I guess it teaches us that when you have a wedding, it's a good idea to have Jesus there." That's as good a lesson as many others I've read. One should never underestimate the ability of preachers to beat a simple story to death. There is no shortage of commentators, through the ages, who have, for example, gone into mathematical contortions to calculate the amount of wine produced by Jesus, and the significance of this amount. Complex arguments have been forwarded regarding the significance of Jesus' mother being present at the wedding. Some commentators wax eloquent about fermentation processes; some preachers tell you far more about wine than they should know; and those who favour abstinence deeply wish that Jesus would have started his ministry with any other miracle but this one, or that he had changed the water into chocolate!

It's also a story which brings to mind many an example of hypocrisy among Christians. A hillbilly preacher who was returning from a revival with some hooch in the trunk of his car was stopped by the sheriff, but he insisted that he had only bottled water in the trunk. When the sheriff insisted on taking a look in the trunk he found ten jugs of home-made wine! Whereupon the hillbilly, feigning surprise, stepped back and exclaimed, "Praise the Lord, he's done it again."

American President Bill Clinton loves to tell a joke about the difference between Arkansas Baptists and Arkansas Methodists. The difference, he says, is that Arkansas Methodists say "Hi" to each other in the liquor store.

Perhaps the best approach to the simple, delightful story told in John's Gospel—a gospel rather big on metaphor and symbol—is the approach taken by Jesus' disciples, who are mentioned only at the beginning and at the end of the story. It's quite possible that they did nothing more than watch what was going on—no attempt to explain the mystery of this amazing transformation, or to get in its way; we are simply told at the end of the story that "his disciples believed in him." (John 2:11)

I'm sure John chose this story as the first miracle story in his gospel for a reason, and my own conjecture is that John was trying to tell those who tended to dismiss Jesus, "You better take another look." What you thought was only water is in fact something far more potent! What you expected to be yet another rabbi putting strictures on your life turns out to be, upon second glance, a religious leader setting a tone of joy and celebration! I mean, using jars normally reserved for purification rituals to hold wedding wine, is a delightful twist on the current religious attitudes.

The point of this gospel story seems to be that the one you dismissed as just another local yokel from Nazareth bears re-examination. What you thought was just another brick in the Jewish religious edifice may turn out to be the cornerstone! ( Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6) This is a Messiah who surprises, bearing a gospel that has some unexpected twists!

## **Unexpected congregational gifts**

If the wedding party in Cana received an unexpected and very welcome wedding gift from Jesus, the Christians in Corinth also received gifts from Jesus, gifts unusual in nature and unanticipated in intent. In fact, it was unusual to find even a Christian spirit among Corinthians. Of all the places that the Apostle Paul established Christian churches, Corinth was a surprise. It would be a little like the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Kitchener establishing a congregation

in Ottawa --a little off the beaten path; resistant to supervision; subject to strange influences; and enjoying a rather independent spirit. Corinth, in addition, had a reputation for raucous and riotous behaviour, if not downright debauchery. On the hill of the Acropolis stood the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, an institution served by a thousand women who did much more than read Scripture! So it's little wonder if Corinthian Christians had some strange notions about congregational life!

Members of the Corinthian church tended to take things to extremes. So when a preacher named Apollos blew into town, some members of the church took to his teachings, holus-bolus. When a preacher named Chloe came into town, other members adopted his distinctive approach. When the Apostle Paul re-visited their community, some members identified with him. Still others looked with disdain upon all of the others and said, "We belong to Christ." (1 Corinthians 1:12)

Some members of the Corinthian congregation wanted to associate freely with unbelievers, while others took a separatist approach, longing to remain pure by living apart from the rest of society. Some members of the church claimed they were allowed to eat any kind of food, because Jewish dietary laws no longer applied to them, while others declared that certain foods, like those used in pagan sacrifices, were off-limits. The raucous nature of the city of Corinth crept into the congregational dynamics of the Corinthian church, with the result that some church members actually hauled other members into court, for the most frivolous of reasons!

Small wonder, then, that when Paul introduced the idea of spiritual gifts to the Corinthian church, they took to it in their usual style. Like the wedding party in Cana, the Corinthians warmed to the more intoxicating of the spiritual gifts. They quickly took to the gift of tongues, liking its ecstatic and noticeable nature. It didn't take them long to establish a hierarchy of gifts, treating these gifts as trophies they had earned, rather than as tools to be used in the service of God.

And Paul's word to them is, "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed." (1 Corinthians 12:1) In other words, you better take another look at this idea, and at yourselves. There may be a variety of gifts, says Paul, but it is "the same Spirit" who bestows these gifts upon you (1 Corinthians 12:4). There may be a variety of ways to serve the Lord, says Paul, but it is "the same Lord" being served (12:5). There may be a variety of congregational and spiritual activities, but it is "the same God" who activates our participation in them. (12:6)

And then comes Paul's summary statement which was difficult for his audience to wrap their Corinthian minds around, "To each," says Paul, "is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (12:7) "To each..." says Paul. In other words, spiritual gifts don't just hang over a congregation like some vague mist over a Swiss valley; spiritual gifts have a personal dimension, and are expressed in the lives of specific individuals. But, "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit" --these various spiritual gifts, of which Paul mentions several—"for the common good."

Human beings often see differences among them as aspects to be evaluated, as qualities that set them apart from others, and that may give them a competitive edge. Paul's words, however, bring to mind the words in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah when the community of faith faced the formidable challenge of rebuilding Jerusalem. When Nehemiah apprised his fellow believers of the challenge before them, they responded "'Let us start building!' (And) so," we read, "they committed themselves to the common good." (Nehemiah 2:18) Just as the rebuilding of Jerusalem required a commitment to something more than personal advancement and personal advantage, so the building of Christian community also requires a commitment to the "common good".

Some lament that concern for the common good has eroded over the years. Our society used to give greater emphasis to the common good, they say. Barristers, for example, used to

designate a certain number of hours as pro bono—"for good"—hours which they donated to those in need. Doctors, in pre-medicare days, would often take on a certain number of patients with the full knowledge that these patients could never pay for the services rendered. These laments may be little more than nostalgia, but a more poignant moment came during the recent storm when a man cutting branches up high in a tree was congratulated by a prominent politician—who shall remain unnamed—for exercising an entrepreneurial spirit in the midst of adversity. "Well," said the man up in the tree, "I'm not actually getting paid for this; it's my neighbour's tree, and I'm just helping out." Vestiges of concern for the common good remain among us, despite the persistent encouragement and advancement of mercenary values.

## **Don't trivialize your giftedness**

If the wedding party in Cana received an unexpected gift from an unusual guest, the Christians in Corinth also received unusual gifts, to be used for an unusual purpose. The gifts shared with Corinthian believers are gifts God gives to all believers, to be used for the common good in whatever congregation and community we find ourselves, but like the Corinthians, we don't always get the point on first glance.

One person tells of taking out their Christmas tree after the holidays and happening to notice, as the tree was carried out the door with a trail of pine needles in its wake, an unopened present that had somehow been hidden by the tree. It wasn't anything big or flashy—no Nintendo 64, or stereo, or diamond necklace—just a small gift, but an unexpected and pleasing discovery nonetheless. I can't imagine such a thing happening at our house, though one year I discovered, well into spring, a gift I had bought for Dorothy hidden away in the back of a desk drawer. It happens.

The spiritual gifts of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians, and elsewhere in the New Testament, are gifts, but they are not like other gifts that we receive. They're not toys. They're not things we can wear, like ties or earrings. They may not even be as practical as soap-on-a-rope, and they're not the kind that come swathed in wrapping-paper and ribbon, but like the little gift hidden behind the Christmas tree many of them remain unopened, or under-utilized. If an unopened gift under the tree in mid-January seems a sad thing, for it could be a gift that might possibly brighten someone's life, might even be a gift someone really needed, unopened, unused, spiritual gifts are also rather sad.

I think the Apostle Paul addresses two main concerns in his New Testament discussion of spiritual gifts: one is the tendency to over-emphasize the importance of spiritual gifts; and the other is a tendency to under-estimate their significance. To those, like the prima donas in Corinth, who liked to flaunt the more visible gifts in the face of those with humbler gifts, Paul cautioned that there is no place for boastfulness or arrogance in the possession and exercise of spiritual gifts. If you're blessed with a talent or gift, remember that is a gift, a cause for humility, not pride, and a gift to be used for the "common good," admonishes Paul.

The other concern Paul addresses in his New Testament discussion of spiritual gifts is no doubt by far the more common concern, and that is the tendency to under-estimate, even trivialize our gifts and talents. We may feel that we are not particularly gifted, that there's nothing special about us, that any talents and abilities we have could scarcely be of any use or interest to the church. There are some among us who honestly feel there is little we can do well. Some of us feel gift-less. Others among us may recognize a gift or two, but for various reasons are afraid of our talents. And some of us, perhaps most of us, feel moderately gifted, but in the hum-drum and daily grind of using these gifts, we grow weary of their effectiveness.

There's a rather simple story about a church under construction in which one of the workers, asked what he was doing, replied, "I'm sawing a board." Another person, working at the same task, replied, "I'm building a pew." A third worker replied, "I'm building a cathedral to the glory of God!" It's a rather crude anecdote, and I'm not sure I'd enjoy working with the third person, but there is a sense in which we should view our spiritual gifts on all three of these levels. Like the

first person sawing a board, we need sufficient focus on the task at hand. Like the second person, building a pew, we need a sense of the whole, so that we can view our particular task in perspective. And occasionally, like the third person, we need to appreciate the accumulative value of our humble contributions.

A lesson from our immediate disaster comes to mind. The ice storm that held Eastern Canada in its grip was not particularly dramatic in its development. No extra-strong winds. No pounding waves. No earth-shaking quakes. But, said one observer (Grant MacDonald), the slow, steady cumulative effect of drop upon drop of freezing rain was more devastating than anything else he's ever seen. Every square foot of area covered with only 1 centimeter of ice represents 20 pounds of additional weight. In many areas much more than one centimeter of ice accumulated. No wonder power lines and trees were snapping left, right and center! Similarly, we may underestimate the worth and effectiveness of our own humble Christian service, but perhaps the drop-by-drop, day-by-day, layer-by-layer accumulation of our meager efforts has much more impact that we can imagine.

### **The gift of re-examination**

This week we received a Christmas letter from some former members of OMC—Allan Sauder and Donna Snyder. You may remember them. Allan is Linda Ruby's brother. In among other items of family news was mention that in July Allan entered a contest sponsored by British Airways and won! Two free tickets to anywhere in the world!

In his winning entry, Allan tells of going to Bangladesh in June of 1979 to begin an Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) assignment. His entry includes a moving account of their choice of Joya as their daughter. At three weeks of age and weighing less than four pounds, Joya was probably the youngest and most vulnerable child in her Dhaka orphanage. Today, she is a beautiful 16 year-old Canadian-Bangladeshi whom some of our children know as a counselor-in-training at Silver Lake Mennonite Camp.

Allan also tells about his MCC work in Bangladesh, writing, "I set about applying my newly acquired MBA to assisting groups of destitute women with marketing their handicrafts...." Revisiting Bangladesh many years later, Allan says, "It was immensely gratifying to see the ongoing businesses that the women's groups had been able to establish, some of which are now exporting in the millions of dollars. In one village where a group of 120 women are still producing solar dried coconut for the biscuit manufacturers in Dhaka, I asked the seven remaining members of the original group of ten poor village women what they had done with their earnings over the past 15 years. Each of them spoke of education for their children."

In March Allan and Donna and their children, Joya and Paul, are returning to Bangladesh to re-establish Joya's roots with her home country, and, writes Allan, "to share in the experience of seeing what is possible—that as individuals we can and do make a difference when we are committed to working toward change for the (common good)." (Allan Sauder, British Airways "Good Cause" Contest)

It's wonderful to win free tickets to anywhere in the world; it's also wonderful to be encouraged to take another look at our efforts and to discover that over time they make a difference! A chief task of our Christian journey is discovering those God-given gifts within each one of us, and finding ways to use them for the common good. As wonderful as it is to see powerful, immediate answers to prayer, it is equally amazing to see the drop-by-drop, patient process of the Holy Spirit molding and shaping our lives, day by day, transforming us ever more into the likeness of Christ, and giving us strength and courage to carry on carrying on.

(All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.)