

Second Sunday after Epiphany – January 20

I have used this image before, will likely do so again. In the Christmas event God wrapped Christ into humanity so well that we would have missed it entirely. He went so deeply undercover that our stultified human senses would have entirely missed the significance of who he is or what he has done. We need Epiphany to unwrap the present, to peel back some of the incarnational “wrapping” for us so that we can see the true nature and character of this Jesus of Nazareth upon whom the Spirit of God has descended and whom God has declared to be His Son.

How does one show that? The miracles are a logical first place to start and we get one of those today. In pericope years A and B we start the Sundays after Epiphany with Jesus collecting disciples and we will do that next week. But this year we get the classic miracle text for this Sunday: Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana.

This tells us a number of things about Jesus. John is likely playing to his audience in the first century. The ancients often ascribed these natural processes to the work of one God or another. There is a strong motif of Jesus divinity in all this. You don't need to make this more complicated than it is. The ancients would have understood that wine making was a mystery which they attributed to the gods. (Dionysius and Bacchus were the Greek deities of wine. If you read the Narnia Chronicles in the concluding section of *Prince Caspian* Bacchus shows up. The movie for some reason omitted that part and felt the need to include a number of other items that Mr. Lewis did not.)

But in addition to the fact of Jesus divinity, we also learn something of the character of this God in the flesh. He attends a celebration. While John does not imply or depict Jesus ‘celebrating’ as such, ancient weddings were not the sort of gatherings at which people simply sat around and waited for the obligatory piece of cake and watched the newlyweds drive off in some chariot with beer cans tied on the back. Ancient weddings were a party of the first order. They ate, they drank, and they danced. These things could go on for a week! Jesus is at a celebration. We too often take ourselves altogether too seriously and imagine that God never has any fun. In fact God in his perfection is joyful. Anything else would be less than perfect.

We also see Jesus doing something really strange or at least which seems strange to us. He turns water into wine, an act which suggests his mastery over the elements, but equally intriguing is his motive. It is pretty clear why he might heal a leper or open the eyes of blind man. Those ailments are terrible afflictions which diminish the human being who endures them. But in this miracle what exactly did Jesus do? He saved a young couple from the embarrassment of running out of wine at their wedding. You can hear the recollections now, “I remember your wedding, that's where they ran out of wine!” People would be saying that on their 25th wedding anniversary. Jesus saved them from embarrassment. No great human need was met here. Or was it? Joy is in short supply in that century and in ours.

Sometimes I think we feel as if we need some huge problem to bring to God, that he doesn't have the time for my sort of mundane life, or that at least my life is not as valuable or significant if it is living the boring world of marital fidelity, honest labor, diligent parenting. It is true that conflict, drama, and disasters make for compelling reading, but Jesus cares about the things that happen in suburbia and sleepy little towns. Today we see him caring about a couple's wedding joy. What does that reveal to you about God? What does that reveal to our people?

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God governs heaven and earth. Today the readings focus us on God's concern for things earthly, including our earthly selves. Too often we imagine that God is interested in our souls, as if that was the real "me" and this body, this world in which I live, is just a temporary or transitory state of being. But God made this world, loves it, and I am his creation in it. Some imagined ethereal state in which I am freed of a body is nowhere attested in Scripture and does not seem to be his idea of creation. Nor does he particularly point us to that as a better life. God is concerned about the created reality, though our enemy and our own sinful nature would turn creation into our god, our true God is actively working against that. He rightly and ably governs his people.

Our world is making a concerted effort to say that if there is a God, he is a lousy governor. The implication is that God is either incompetent or not good. Turn to the news feed on your smart phone and the question could be asked: How could he allow ...? I would doubt that this is plaguing the bulk of your members, but don't be surprised if the young folks in your congregation are confronted with this question. It would be good for them to hear an answer. This sermon might not be the right spot for it, but perhaps it is, or a Bible study or some other venue. Christianity needs to find a way to assert the good governance of God in the face of a reality that challenges that. As Paul says, we live by faith and not by sight, but faith is a response to a spoken promise. We have to speak the promise.

If we do that, we might want to think very carefully about what we will say. The Bible's answer is not as satisfying as we would sometimes like it to be. Calvinism's assertion of God's sovereignty really not as helpful as they would imagine nor is it as faithful to Scripture as they think. The Biblical answer is complex. It first demands a measure of humility on our part. What seems like it would be good to us who live inside the situation, might not actually be good. There is this law of unintended consequences. But this is not really the divine answer, just a careful observation. God's answer to suffering and evil is somehow profoundly wrapped up in the cross. God's response to suffering is not to stamp it out with force, but somehow to take that evil to himself

and transform it. I don't understand it, but God's answer is counterintuitive. I want a power solution and he offers up a love solution which is wholly alien to me.

Thus, the prayer draws the praying person's attention to the merciful ears which God turns toward us. He listens to us in mercy. Count on it. Depend on it. He does not love us because we got this right or because our theology is crystal clear on this matter.

We seek peace from him, but it is a peace which transcends and informs our whole life. It is His peace not our peace which we need. This Shalom/peace is essential to the living of our lives too. At war with my own passions or letting them control me is a prescription for much conflict and misery, not the Shalom for which I pray. This Shalom, however, comes from God. He must give; we cannot manufacture this peace through cross-legged eastern meditation exercises or the power of positive thinking. He must give or we do not really have. And so we pray.

Readings

Isaiah 62:1-5

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet,
until her righteousness goes forth as brightness,
and her salvation as a burning torch.

²The nations shall see your righteousness,
and all the kings your glory,
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will give.

³You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

⁴You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate,
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married;
for the LORD delights in you,
and your land shall be married.

⁵For as a young man marries a young woman,
so shall your sons marry you,
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you.

⁶*On your walls, O Jerusalem,
I have set watchmen;*

*all the day and all the night
they shall never be silent.
You who put the LORD in remembrance,
take no rest,
7 and give him no rest
until he establishes Jerusalem
and makes it a praise in the earth.*

In the chapters immediately prior to this passage Isaiah has been hitting the marriage and celebration theme repeatedly. You might say that this text speaks about a “forensic virginity.” I am not sure just how that works into a sermon. For many years before Isaiah and right up to the exile, the prophets had spoken of the people of Israel “whoring” after other gods. Considering the worship practices of the Canaanite religions which attracted them, it was not an inappropriate analogy and may be more literal than a figure of speech. Canaanite religion had a certain “Hugh Hefner” quality to it.

Isaiah speaks of the LORD renewing his love for the land of Israel and her people. He speaks of returning to that wedding night when the bridegroom rejoices over his bride. We all know that one cannot go back to that moment, but don't put it past God. It is not only here, but also in the Psalter we hear of God “putting our sins away from us as far as the east is from the west” or that he will “remember their sins no more.” This divine amnesia about our sins is well attested in the Scriptural witness. The struggle here does not seem to be God's but ours. We so often find ourselves in a conversation with him in which he has put the past behind him but we are clinging to it.

A famous illustration of this point was a story which is set in Mexico. A young girl started to have visits from Jesus. Soon the story began to spread and was beginning to cause something of a stir in the local community. The bishop was making the rounds through the diocese and heard about this little girl and decided to investigate. He sat down with her and had a most delightful discussion about this Jesus who came to visit her. He did not really know what to think about all this, her description of Jesus was disquieting but also rang of authenticity. He decided that some sort of a test was in order. He cast about in his mind for something that the little girl could ask Jesus but which would be known only to him. As their interview drew to a close he said to the little girl, “Do me a favor. The next time you see Jesus ask him a question for me, ask him what was my last sin.”

A month or so later the little girl once more found herself before the Bishop. She claimed that Jesus had come to see her again. The Bishop looked her in the eye and asked, “Did you ask him my question?”

“O yes, I did, your Excellency, but he said he forgot.”

I love that little story because it forces you to confront this on a couple of levels. The little girl's answer is the perfect answer – God has forgotten our sins, but we have the hard time with this. I

bet the bishop remembered that last sin. God comes to this relationship anew; he does this every day and every moment. We want to make him out to be just like us, vindictive, grudge bearing, and with this book of my offenses in which there are pages of black marks. But that is Satan's book, not his. His is the book of life,

This passage from Isaiah speaks of the powerful love of God which simply cannot be silent; it must speak on behalf his beloved. God speaks Israel righteous. If you have a hard time with this connection, I recommend you re-read John 1 "In the beginning was the Word..." Jesus is God speaking us righteous. He is the righteous creating word of God come into the flesh of humanity, lest we miss the object of his speech.

This is universal, all the nations shall see this, distant kings shall marvel. The people of God shall be his treasure! This is the parable of the treasure found in the field. The man is not like us, the man who finds the treasure and in his joy gives up everything for the treasure, that man is Jesus! I am the treasure he delights in. I am the rich man's plunder he steals from Satan. I am the diadem he holds in his hands and loves.

In verse 4 you might want to find an older translation of this, the RSV or the KJV such as here:

⁴Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah, and thy land Beulah: for the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married.

If you have an elderly woman in your congregation named Beulah or another in the community, this is an excellent opportunity. The land had long been stained with the pollution of the idols of the Canaanites. Now they would once more be the pure and virtuous land God had always wanted it to be. The land would not be forsaken, as it was emptied of people by the exiles which had been wrought by Assyrian and Babylonian emperors.

The LORD delights in his people once more as a young man delights in his bride. Yes, that is an image which is filled with earthy, sexual imagery. It is almost too much for our Sunday morning crowds, but that is more a reflection of our enemy trying to keep us from this message. Our televisions are filled with references to sexual intercourse between unmarried couples and various genders, so much so that we have become almost numb to it, sometimes Church has fallen off the other side of that equation, we have banished all sexuality from our midst, becoming something of a eunuch society, when in fact God celebrates the sexual union of a husband and wife. Are we then surprised that in the vacuum of even the mention of sexuality we find a spate of sexual scandals by clergy and others? When there is nothing healthy in the way of a sexual conversation going on, the perverse and the pathological will fill in that space.

I included the two verses after the pericope because I found it so interesting. Isaiah has us imagine a watchman on the wall, causing God to remember something. God loves to be caught in his promises; he wants us to hold him accountable for them like this watchman does. Today we have Jesus providing the wine for a feast. There are Eucharistic resonances there I doubt we will want to miss. But here is another one. When we hold that wafer in our hands, when we tip

that chalice into our mouths, we are doing it for the “remembrance of him.” There is a grammatical ambiguity there. Are we remembering him or does he do the remembering? Isaiah would seem to suggest that God also remembers. And when God remembers, good things happen. He once remembered and send a wind to dry up the waters of the flood. He once remembered a promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and sent an old shepherd named Moses to free his people from Pharaoh. Reminding God is a very good thing to do.

Psalm 128

Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!

² You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;
you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you.

³ Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.

⁴ Behold, thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.

⁵ The LORD bless you from Zion!
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life!

⁶ May you see your children's children!
Peace be upon Israel!

What a wonderful psalm! It speaks of a domestic and simply tranquility. I am no romantic who pines for the simple rustic life. I grew up in rural Missouri and know that such a life is far better imagined than lived, but this psalm is not speaking of that. It speaks of God blessing the home and family of a man who “fears the LORD.” That can be done anywhere and in any time and place.

Such a relationship with God serves to transform the lives we do lead with our spouses, our children, and neighbors. God loves the simple and small things we do, he blesses the marriage and the family, not only the great and dramatic.

I Corinthians 12:1-11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. ² You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. ³ Therefore I

want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

We are back into the Green season – this time the Sundays after Epiphany. In this time we resume a semi-continuous reading of Paul’s letters to the Corinthians that we left off last March with the beginning of Lent. It is disjointed and difficult and probably the part of this whole pericope system that I like the least. But we get it. Paul’s letters are perhaps the best place to do this since they often are so preachable in their individual parts.

Verses 1-3 speak about the Main Thing. The main thing is that all of us who are in this room worshiping Jesus can do so because we are filled with the same Holy Spirit. The first thing that Paul points to here is unity, a unity which is not born out always in my opinions or what I think we ought to do, but is born out in our confession of Christ which all of us make simply by walking through those doors.

Paul then goes on to speak of the opposing tension to that Main Thing which is true of all of us. Diversity is good. Just because we have the same Spirit does not mean we are all the same, and that is good as well. One Spirit can work in lots of different ways, and those ways are given for the “Common Good” in verse 7. We can delight that the other person is different than I am, that they have different ideas, that we are not the same. In fact, this person’s gift and my gift may complement one another really well. But this is all for the common good, that is important here.

Paul then catalogues some of the different gifts possible, but this is no way a complete list. He doesn’t intend it to be. One is wise, another heals, another works miracles, another prophecies, and another can speak in tongues. This vast variety is the fruit of the same Spirit who gives out these gifts as he wants to give. This is His church, not my church, not your church, this is His creation. When I am the owner of the church, the other who is different than I am becomes a personal threat and it completely soaks up my joy.

The beauty of the model which Paul proposes here that this is the Spirit’s work, that he has lots of tools in his tool box in addition to the tools he has given me is that now the ideas and the

ministry get multiplied. They are not all channeled through one way to see things, but they are empowered by one very potent holy spirit.

This can be taken to an extreme, the brakeman on all this is the common good statement in verse 7. Eighty five people all pursuing different agendas will not really serve the common good. There is a place and a point at which we have to ask that common good question and even be able to submit my ideas and plans to those of the “common body” of Christ. Remember, it is not my church, but his. That does not mean I get fatalistic about this either. I am part of his church, he has given me gifts to use and to use joyfully in the service of that church. Do I care what goes on? Absolutely, but I am not the owner of what happens. It is a fine line between apathy and fatalism, a tension between two extremes into which we can easily fall and will fall repeatedly, which is why this is his church and not my church.

As long as we are striving as a body to be in his mission, furthering his kingdom we are engaged in this. Paul paints a picture of the church here in which we are given to watch and see what the Spirit is doing, and sometimes to be really surprised by it. Not surprised that we are surprised, but expecting surprise, if you can think about that it that way.

Paul speaks today of Spiritual gifts. In light of the fact that the Gospel lesson is so compelling and the OT too, I am thinking I will not do much here. There are so many who treat this, I will let them have a stab at it right now. If you need a sanitized and salutary treatment of this, I commend you to the CTCR document on spiritual gifts. You can download a PDF of an official position at: <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/spiritgifts.pdf>

John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.² Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples.³ When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.”⁴ And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.”⁵ His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

⁶ Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.⁷ Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim.⁸ And he said to them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast.” So they took it.⁹ When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom¹⁰ and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

¹¹ This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed (faithed) in him.

¹² *After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples, and they stayed there for a few days.*

Several years ago, when I started doing these pericope studies, I was blessed to have Ed St. John in the Tuesday group. Ed's family runs a winery in Sonoma, County¹. Ed tells us that 180 gallons of wine would be 76 cases of wine, each case has 12 bottles. If you are planning a wedding reception you usually figure that each bottle will serve 3 people. A winery would calculate that this much would serve 2,736 people at a wedding reception. Jesus knows how to throw a party!

In the years between, we have come to some sermon ideas/concepts which some have found helpful:

- 1. The old wine is the old creation – Christ's created wine is the new creation - see hymn #408 in LSB. The old wine cannot satisfy us, only the new wine satisfies the longing of our thirsty souls.*
- 2. The Rabbi's used to say that without wine there is no joy. Jesus brings pleasure eternal. See another LSB hymn: Jesus has come and brings pleasure eternal!*
- 3. Jesus' words to his mother seem harsh. On one hand they are simply the way that one refers to the female of the species at the time. But there is more to this. John is tying this event to the passion – this is exactly how Jesus calls to her from the cross when John is charged to be her son.*
- 4. We are we the clay pots, filled with baptismal water! Has Jesus turned what looked like simple water, common stuff, into the very joy-giving life which astounds with a new quality. This wine is "best of class." it has that Wine Spectator 100 rating!*

A sermon Idea: perhaps a story sermon told from the perspective of one of those clay pots standing there on a wedding day. It was a day when the wine skins got all the glory, they were but water pots which were used for the hospitable and ritual cleansing of the guests. Their water was used to wash hands and feet. That is what you were until the master said "Fill them." Filled full they became something more than humble pots. They held a treasure. We are, in the words of Paul today, people filled with amazing and wonderful gifts. We may not look that special on the outside, in fact the world may laugh at us and call us out of date and humble folks, no two clay pots are ever quite the same. But God has filled us with a treasure (II Corinthians) and we are now the instruments of his kingdom, Spirit filled. We often think we are humble, and it is true. We

¹ If you want to check out the winery's website, you can find it at <http://www.pedroncelli.com/> Ed will happily sell you wine through the website as well. I highly recommend the Mother Clone Zinfandel.

are not much, but that doesn't stop God from doing great things with us. The attention on that day was all on the bride and groom, the parents and the feast. But the real story was happening in the water pots, the simple earthenware that was purely utilitarian. No one had put this on the wedding registry, no one would buy this at Macy's and give it to the young couple. This was beneath notice – but it became the very vessel of Christ's miracle.

The preacher will want to take note that John himself focuses also on the servants. They are the only ones who see what Jesus has done. The Master of the feast does not. He just thinks the groom has done this backward. But the servants, the humble ones, they can see what Jesus is up to, they can see what he is doing. Your people are the servants – they can see. The servant sees the same things that the world sees, but he/she sees it differently. The world will not notice this kingdom in us. We will not get glory for this, but people will be saved, the thirst will be quenched, and the kingdom will come. It may come one cup of cold water given to a child at a time. It may come one little old widow comforted and visited. It may come one marriage supported and encouraged. It can come in all sorts of ways. But this text seems to suggest that it comes through the simple, the humble, the regular folk, like the folk who are sitting before us on a typical Sunday morning. They need to hear this. Jesus sees them and uses their lives to make his kingdom come. Celebrate that!

A lot of us serve congregations which are in decline. It feels like people walk by and never notice us. We are invisible to the world. These pots were essentially invisible. No one paid any attention to them. But Jesus did. Do we ask people to see themselves through Jesus' eyes? We often measure ourselves by the yardstick of success, as if our statistic report is the only way to know if we are really Christian. But the fact is that through humble things God does great things. The simple work of a community to care for the little, least, and simple can be precious in the eyes of God.

He is the one who turns our lives into miracles. The jars did not do anything other than be the jars they were created to be. But they became the vessels of a miracle. But that miracle was his doing.

Another Sermon Idea: These pots were purification pots, pots used to wash hands and feet, they were not drinking vessels, but when the word and water came together inside those pots, they became joy-giving and beautiful. They were still the humble pots they had always been, but now what comes out of them is no longer the wash water, but now is the beautiful wine of joy. They had been empty, now they are filled with what no one expected of them. They are the same old clay pots they always were, but now out of them flows something which God has made and which surprises and impresses everyone who drinks it. That sounds a lot like Christians who have been filled with the Spirit of God and now, though they still look like the old people, are in fact also the new people.

I love this text for a variety of reasons. As the preceding paragraphs demonstrate, it is eminently preachable and has some perfectly marvelous things to say.

The first words are themselves a whole sermon: On the third day there was a wedding... If you read through the preceding verses of John 1 you start to see a sequence of days which starts with John the Baptist pointing out Jesus to his disciples and naming him the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But if you read this carefully you will notice something odd. There are more than three days here. John may not have been a well educated man, but he was a successful business man. You can bet he could count to three. This is not a lapse, this is intentional.

What are we to make of it? It does not take a literary or theological genius to see that the key is right here in our text: the third day. It is not the third day in a chronological sense, but the third day in a very real and much more significant theological sense. On the first day John points to Jesus and says "The Lamb of God!" The lamb was a sacrificial lamb, one slaughtered for the sins of the people. That's Good Friday. The next two days Jesus gathers disciples. The ancient church had a very interesting practice of baptizing people under normal circumstances only on one day out of the year, Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter. Of course in an emergency they would baptize any time. In Baptism Jesus is gathering people, gathering more and more. This is what he does in Baptism, he gathers people to himself. Then, on the third day, on the Easter day, on the resurrection day, on the last day, there is a great feast, a wedding feast, and Jesus provides the joy.

John seems to be giving his audience a precursor of things to come. He is foreshadowing the passion and resurrection narrative, but he is also saying something about his audience's current experience of Jesus. They are currently in the gathering days, another day comes, however, an Easter day, a wedding day, when Jesus provides the wine and it is good.

Of course there is another dimension to all this. At the end of the story John tells us that this is the first of Jesus' miracles, he manifested his glory and the disciples "faithed" in him. Remember that English betrays us here. We have no verbal form of faith, only the inadequate word "believe." The difference is all about trust, love, and relationship. I can believe you if you tell me that there is an elephant on the street next door, or not believe, but it becomes faith when I put my life into the words you speak. "I will safely pilot this plane to the place you want to go." I have to have faith in the man who says that me, or I won't get on that plane.

Of course, there is another place to run with this text, a theme to which the OT lesson lends some support. The whole idea of marriage and the metaphor that marriage provides to us of God's love for us, is a powerful message too often neglected in preaching. Of course we run into the whole reformation of manners which took place in the 1800's at this point. Luther, in the 16th century could be quite earthy in his sermons. He was not gross or profane, but the whole of life was simply that, the whole of life. Sometimes this meant he called his opponent Johann Eck

“Dreck” which of course sounds like Eck but was actually a Low German word for the manure pile behind the barn. That sort of speech is considered out of place in polite company today, but perhaps nowhere other than in church. We certainly have seen a degradation of those standards on television. The rest of the world is ready to yell a vulgarity which refers to intercourse at the slightest of provocations. But from listening to our churchly conversations, one would never know that Christians are capable of reproduction.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the discussion of sexuality. Because we have refused to speak of healthy sexuality, considering it a private affair inappropriate for polite company, the void left in our speech has quickly been filled by a sexual speech which is decidedly unhealthy, perverse, and often worthy of the epithet “disgusting.”

For the Christian this presents a serious challenge. The Bible repeatedly makes use of a sexual metaphor to describe the relationship between God and the people, the single most intimate and beautiful relationships we know as human beings. But because so many of our people are only familiar with the discussion of sexuality they see on television, this metaphor has become sullied or worse a picture of domineering perversity. God calls the Church His bride. He does not say “soul-mate” or “best friend” but bride. Everyone knows what that means, but can we think of it healthily and beautifully or does it immediately descend to pornography? At the point of his death, the great medieval preacher, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, was preaching a series of sermons to his fellow Cistercian monks, all celibate men. It was a series based on the Song of Songs, the love song of Solomon. He was only on chapter 3, but he was in sermon 86 of the series at the point when he died. Do we ever preach on Song of Songs?

There is another theme which runs in this text, that of the servant. It is interesting, in the same way that we saw several months ago with the healing of Naaman, that the servants are aware of things that the supposed master of the feast is not. For John’s audience which contained a great number of slaves, this was a way of valuing them. But it also says something about the nature of the Christian today. He serves, he is at the beck and call of others, the world, his God. He is not his own person anymore, but purchased with the blood of Christ.

But just because you and I are no longer our own people, that does not mean that there are not certain advantages to being a Christian. Indeed, we have an insight into problems and their solutions, into the workings of Christ, which the world does not see. We often are in the business of handing a cup to the world which it believes simply to be some mundane refreshment but which is imbued with the very mystery of God. Every time we bandage a child’s skinned knee, we are in a small way the hands of Christ.

There is another possibility with this text, which draws together a number of the other themes but which revolves around the miracle itself. Christ bids the servants to fill six large jars with water

and turns it into wine. If you do the simple math on this, he creates somewhere around 120-180 gallons of wine. This is some serious wedding cheer.

In a rather puritanical society we struggle with countless issues of addiction and alcohol abuse, but again, I cannot wonder if this is in the context of a church which simply does not model healthy alcohol consumption. We tell our children not a drop until you are 21 and then we turn them loose and wonder why every year sees a number of young people drinking themselves to death on our college campuses. Without a healthy practice of consumption, they are suddenly, without any oversight, given supply only limited by their finances. I have sat through three presentations by the State Department, AIFS (the company we are using to manage the Rome trip), and from CU itself. All of them have told the students that Italians loathe American exchange students because they are perceived as foolish about alcohol which leads to all sorts of rude and problematic behavior. Do we need to learn something from the Italians?

In the same way that we need to keep a healthy sexuality as part of our conversation do we also need to keep joy and conviviality as healthy parts our lives for the sake of our children? Do we need to insist that our churches allow a little beer or wine or champagne at the wedding receptions in our facilities so we can demonstrate that this can be done moderately, healthily, and joyfully? The ancients were also aware of the problems of alcohol. In fact we see a little of their accommodation of the problems. The master of the banquet was an important “official” at these gatherings who was strictly charged with making sure things did not get out of hand. He governed the mixture of wine and water. Too little water and everyone got drunk. He was to maintain a balance in the potency, to allow the joy, but to keep things under control.

This text is marvelous because God loves a good time. He loves the joy of a wedding feast. Jesus is there, when there is a problem which would dampen that joy for the young couple and their families, Jesus does his first miracle to prop up that joy. Can we really miss that point? No one was raised from the dead here, no leper cleansed, no demon exorcised, nor any blind eyes opened. This miracle is simply Jesus making sure someone’s wedding isn’t a bust because they ran out of wine. He spares a family some embarrassment. What is more, Jesus is apparently pretty good at the wine production. It is superior wine, wine which pleases the palate, wine which the master of ceremonies says is remarkable. Can we draw the conclusion from this that good wine is a godly thing? Probably that will still depend on how it is used, but that God made us for joy, that we were given senses like taste and smell and a sense of “good” and “beautiful” are powerful indicators of the sort of God we have and the sort of life he created us for.

Law

1. My life seems like a drudgery sometimes, and well it should. I have deserved all the suffering I have. I wonder sometimes if God doesn’t just have it in for me.

2. I know that God says he has forgiven me, but what does that mean? I am still tormented by my past, I cannot let it go, it seems. I come to worship today with the same load of guilt I had last week. I have made no progress in my sanctification. God must be weary of me. Perhaps I come with the crushing weight of some past transgression which haunts me. I am stuck with it.
3. In my quiet moments, rare as they may be, when I really take an honest look at myself, I am depressed by what I see. How could God love me? I am a wretch who deserves God's wrath.
4. And so I manage to turn every good thing into an occasion for misery. I abuse my drink until it threatens my life. Sexuality has become something sordid and best kept in a dark corner lest anyone know my perversities.
5. I am powerless before all this joy-destroying reality. Death will be my just desserts, an end to my ability to make a mess of things.
6. I find this especially true in the most potent and best gifts that God has given me. My appetites for good things so easily become gluttonous and self-destructive. My sexuality is so easily turned into a prison of cupidity. The sweet joy of a glass of wine becomes the tyrant of alcoholism.

Gospel

1. Jesus is concerned about joy – he turns water into wine just so this couple can rejoice.
2. God sent Jesus for our joy, that which we lost has been restored to us, miraculously, recreatively. The prostituted people of God have been restored to their virgin state, that which we thought irrevocably lost has been given back.
3. God delights in his people, in you and me. He does not merely tolerate us, but he really and truly loves us, he holds us in his hands and admires us, we are his treasures.
4. God takes care of his treasures, he delights in our joy. The joy of a married couple's intimacy is a holy thing, the family gathered around the table at holiday or other celebration is a sacred event to him, the silly joke your seven year old tells you makes him smile too.
5. This is an Easter Joy, Jesus came to joy on that Easter morning, a joy which is but a foretaste of heaven's joy, of the last day's joy, of eternal joy. Life is good, God loves it, and he gives it in abundance.
6. Because God has written his joy into my life in the water of baptism and foretaste of the feast to come, God also is actively laying claim to the things which Satan perverts and would use for my destruction. He returns my sexuality, my appetites, my enjoyment to me.

Sermon Ideas

1. A bride once more (OT: That the hearer would rejoice that God has removed his/her guilt and completely forgotten about the past and today delights in his creation. He has united himself with it in the person of Jesus, doubly made us his own possession in the blood of Christ and delights in us as his great treasure, his beloved bride.)

Isaiah preached to a people discouraged by what they saw. Their land had been destroyed and their people largely carted off to exile. If you ascribe these words to Isaiah in the 8th century or to a later Isaiah at the time of the exile really doesn't make much difference. Both of them would have seen a bleak picture. He speaks, contrary to the experience of the people of what God sees. God sees a treasure, a delight, a people who are his bride.

The name Beulah (Married) might be useful here. It was much more common a number of years ago, in the late 1800's. I have not known many women named Beulah, in fact, only one or two. But the name brings to mind elderly, rather corpulent widows, who preside over dysfunctional broods. The idea of imagining them as fresh brides on their wedding day seems difficult. I suppose I can imagine that once they were, but now? But my imagination is limited, God's is limitless.

The miracle of God's salvation is that Beulah's are given to live up to that name. No longer forsaken and desolate they are "my delight" and "married." We imagine that virginity once lost is forever lost and within our time limited abilities it is truly lost. But God is not limited as we are, and his salvation transcends our imagination. He takes that which we considered irrevocably lost, our innocence, our perfection, our beauty in his sight, and he gives it back to us in Christ.

It is absolutely true that we have made a mess of things. Sin and our foolish rebellion against God have made our lives miserable. Who can deny it? And who can change that? I cannot, but God can and in Jesus God has changed it. The great challenge for our hearers often is that they don't really believe it. they hang onto their sins tenaciously, not only the doing of them, but also the remembering of them. God has forgotten them, God has restored the lost virginity of his people, but we continue to see ourselves as "fallen women." Today God proposes, renews the vows, leads us down the aisle.

2. This Earthy and Earthly Jesus (That the hearer would reclaim the whole of his/her life for Jesus sake, acknowledging that Christ has died for the whole, and that the whole of life is for his/her holy joy.)

This sermon is really about unpacking the epiphany Jesus in a particular way. He has come into the flesh and has taken up the flesh. It is a Gnostic Jesus who is above celebrating, who does not partake of the whole human existence and which sees the wedding party as something beneath him. John has us see him at a party, and not just any party, a wedding party, which is a celebration of a sexual union between a husband and bride. When the celebration is in some peril, he creates the wine which will keep the party going, and not just a bottle or two, but gallons and gallons of wine. And it is good wine, he cares about the palate, the bouquet, the way it runs down the side of your glass and its finish. He wants you to like it.

Our realization of sin has often caused us to reject not only the sin but the occasion for the sin as well. It is true that the alcoholic may not drink wine or alcohol in any form. In his disease he simply cannot handle it. But it is not the wine that is evil, it is the disease. Perhaps it is for insurance and legal reasons that we forbid alcohol in our church building, but it also feeds that misbelief that God does not approve of wine. Likewise we all know the sexual sins which plague our society, and thus we strive mightily to show our children, our community, perhaps even ourselves that there is more to life than the hyper-sexuality which we see on television and in the theaters. But do we in this ignore the healthy and blessed gift God has given us of our sexuality expressed between a husband and a wife, a sexuality Jesus came to celebrate this day in Cana?

But with this we run a risk of presenting to our world, our children, ourselves, a picture of the Christian and our God which is removed from this life. Jesus today breaks that down for us. God gave us eyes to see, ears to hear, tongues that taste and all our senses. He has given us minds and appetites and a sense of pleasure and joy. He created these things and he delights in them. Jesus has not come to remove the Christian from the things of this world which give pleasure and joy, but to claim them for himself. The glass of wine, the double-entente between a husband and wife are celebrations of God's creation. The party, the intimacy, the feast, are all also part of God's good gift to us.

Jesus came into the flesh of this world, to redeem it, not to remove us from the physicality of our creation. As Paul says in Colossians 1, God was reconciling all things to himself. (For a fascinating word study, explore "all things" in Paul's letters, use the Biblegateway word search program and tell it to search for the exact phrase.)

That reconciliation of all things means not less joy for the Christian, but far, far more joy for the Christian. The glass of wine, the spouse's embrace, the challenge which we have

at work, the competition on the field, all the things which our enemy would turn against us are first and foremost gifts from God, gifts which Jesus has redeemed with his blood and now are holy and good things which can be enjoyed in Him. Will that mean there are healthy and not healthy ways to enjoy them, of course, but Satan cannot rob us of their joy.

3. The humblest servants of all – the pots (Gospel: That the Holy Spirit would transform the humble life of the hearer into the precious treasure house of God’s gracious love and forgiveness to the people he/she knows.)

John says interesting things about the servants of God today. They know where the wine comes from, even though the master of ceremonies, the guy in charge of the party, does not.

But there are another set of very humble servants one might consider – the very water jars which show up in this story. They have humble roles to play. They are the containers for water, and not drinking water, but wash water. People dip it out and wash the dust off their feet. They get the grime from the market place off their hands. But today Jesus elevates the humble and lifts up the lowly. (You might just remind them of the Magnificat – the song Mary sang in Luke 2)

Jesus sees the water jars there and orders his servants to fill them up. Filled up at the master’s orders, the pots come to contain a treasure, a beautiful vintage, which surprises all who encounter it.

This sermon will ask the hearer to consider him or herself one of these pots. We are humble folks. We probably have looked at ourselves and thought that we are not much. It is the default Lutheran attitude. But filled in Baptism, we have become, in Paul’s words, jars of clay that contain a treasure (II Corinthians.)

1. Christ has loved the unlovable, specifically me. But that love doesn’t just stop at the brim of the jar, it is dipped out and shared to the wonder of the host. I have a love which the world doesn’t understand, but which makes the world sweeter for that love.
2. Christ has forgiven me in baptism. But forgiveness in the clay pot is not what he had in mind. He means it to fuel the joy at the party. Read the parable of the Prodigal again (Luke 15). Now I can say to any sin, to any sinner, “I forgive.” God has promised to back up those words (Matthew 18).
3. God has called me precious and important to him, using the language of family – child, bride. That means that the guy or gal next to me at home or at work or at school or in my neighborhood is also somehow changed in my eyes – they too are precious,

they are important. They are the very treasure of God. I see it, for I am a servant of God. The world may not, but I do.

This sermon will ask the hearer to believe what God has said about him/her and to act on it. He/she has been filled with a treasure, the beautiful wine, the life which makes the rest of the world sweeter for knowing us. The worldly masters don't quite know where we come from, they don't quite understand, but the servants know. We are filled with the very life of Jesus.