

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Epiphany 2-C; 20 January 2019
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

Jars of Wine

In nomine...

I. Intro

When I first sat down to work on today's sermon, I did a double-take. Did you notice what was odd about the Gospel lesson? Even though we're in Year C of the lectionary, the year in which we read Luke all year long, today's Gospel is from John. What's going on today that had to come from John instead of Luke? Well, we're here in the season of *Epiphany*, talking about when Jesus *appeared* or *was revealed* to the world. That's what Epiphany means. So from Luke we talked about how God *revealed* the birth of Jesus to magi from the East; and how those magi *revealed* much to the people of Jerusalem, to Herod, and to Mary. Last week we talked about Jesus' baptism, when that dove came and a voice from heaven spoke and some things about Jesus were *revealed* to John the Baptist. Today Jesus' glory is *revealed* to his disciples in a truly funny story that is found only in John.

II. I will change your name

But let's start with a brief nod to our first reading in Isaiah. Wasn't it a beautiful passage? When I lived and worked in the Bronx, we used this today's Old Testament reading regularly as a baptismal text. When we are baptized, we cast off one identity and we are given a new one. God gives us a new name, a name of beauty and distinction. We are given a new identity and a new assurance that God rejoices over us the same way a newlywed rejoices over their partner. Think of that! That same passion, that same desire, that same celebratory whole-heartedness. In baptism, you accepted this kind of affection from God and were reborn as a new person, with a new outlook on life and a new approach to living.

Some of us were baptized as babies, some as children, and some as adults. All of us are still learning to live into the meaning of that baptism. But that baptismal regeneration, rebirth as a new person, has been God's project among humankind since, oh, say, Genesis chapter 3! The work of God among human beings is to take away our shame and our sadness, to remove from

us our subjugation to those things that hurt us and tell us we are worth – *less*, and to teach us to stand firm and confident in God’s love for us. This is the message of the entire Bible and certainly the central message of the prophets, including Isaiah!

III. Spiritual Gifts

Now, our Epistle reading is also about that changing of names and identities as it was encountered by the first generation of the Christian church. Paul writes of “varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” and “varieties of services, but the same Lord” and “varieties of activities, but the same God.” Paul talks about all the different ways Christians encounter God, serve God, and build up their community with one another. And he talks about how those different gifts and passions and abilities are all part of God’s plan to build one, unified, mutually supportive community. Some preach, as several of our younger members did so excellently during Advent, and some serve communion. Some feed the hungry through Kitchen of Hope and some drive the church van to bring those who cannot drive themselves. Some of you work miracles and healing in other lives, some interpret Scripture and the world, and some organize parties. We all do different things, at different seasons in our lives, according to the inspiration of the Spirit of God who dwells in us.

Where did you get this Spirit of God? It was in you from the beginning; it is a part of your very nature. But again it was in baptism that you (or your sponsors on your behalf) acknowledged that Spirit and sought to cooperate with it. It is as a result of your baptism, your cooperation with God’s Spirit, that your identity and your role and your activities are all changed to reflect your acknowledgment that you belong to God, that God delights in you, and that God changes the world through you.

IV. Water into wine

Which brings us back to our Gospel reading from the Gospel of John.

Mary was attending a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Jesus was there, too, with his followers trailing behind. They run out of wine and Mary immediately brings this to Jesus’ attention. Wow: what does this mean? Does Mary think Jesus has the scratch to go buy more wine? Or has she seen... unusual things happen around Jesus before?

I like to think that Jesus would have willingly spent his money to buy more wine. That seems to be Jesus' nature. But in this case, Jesus had no money. Mary was expecting something else. Had Jesus done this particular thing before? At dinner at home? At another party with family and friends?

Jesus complains to his mother, "Aww, mom!" He sounds like an adolescent. But Mary just says, "You know what to do" and orders the waiters to give him a hand. Can't you see your mom doing this same thing?

In any case, Jesus obeys his mom. He has the waiters fill the jars and then take a sample to the guy in charge of the party. By then the water had become wine. A lot of wine. Good wine. That must have been some party! What kind of party has 150 gallons of wine *after* the first batch has run out?

And so Jesus' special relationship to the power of God, that relationship already known by his mother, was revealed to his disciples as well. And John tells us they put their faith in him.

V. Invitation

Those stone jars Jesus used were meant for Jewish cleansing rituals: for the washing of hands, for example. But that night, at the wedding, those jars were re-named and re-purposed. They became wine jars. Because they had an abrupt encounter with God they came into a new identity.

As we encounter God in baptism, and in living into our baptism, God fills *us* anew with God's Holy Spirit. That Holy Spirit is for the world like fine wine is for a wedding feast: a source of goodness and gladness and a sign of celebration.

When Paul talked about Spiritual Gifts, he was talking about the things we do and say and think and become as a result of Jesus' miraculous work inside us. Jesus turns our water into wine, our faults into fountains of grace, our wounds into sources of strength, our vulnerability into genuine presence with others. In baptism, in a life that reflects our baptismal covenant, Jesus' power is revealed to the world: to us and those around us: a fresh Epiphany every day.

We, St. Thomas', as a parish and as the members thereof, constitute the physical hosts of Jesus' continued Epiphany in Glassboro and Franklinville and Williamstown and Monroeville, in the Diocese of New Jersey and this whole region. Just like the bread and the wine we will share together in a few minutes, "normal" things become extraordinary because they are invested with God's presence. The bread becomes "the body of Christ." We are given new names like "Christian" and "church" and "Episcopalian."

You are the jar that everyone thought was just a normal jar, used for normal day-to-day tasks. But you who have been baptized have been renewed, re-purposed, and renamed by your Creator. You hold something precious and your life has been acknowledged as a gift to the world. You have been illumined by God's Word and Sacraments that you may shine with the radiance of Christ's glory. I'm not talking to just a few of you. I mean all of you: every single one, and all of us together. Now is the time of the Epiphany: and that Epiphany is seen in you.

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