

“But You Have Kept the Good Wine until Now”
I Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11; Isaiah 62:1-5

Isaiah 62:1-5

¹For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.

²The nations shall see your vindication, 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 builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

John 2:1-11

¹On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.

³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” ⁴And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” ⁵His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

⁶Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, “Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.” So they took it.

⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, “Everyone serves the

good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

I Corinthians 12:1-11

¹Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. ³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

The Sermon

Science tells us that there is a finite number of atoms in the universe that keep getting recycled, and that all matter that exists was once inside a star, which exploded out, and somehow, from the vastness of the cosmos and the murky depths of immeasurable time, a certain batch of those atoms coalesced together on January 17, 2016, to comprise the physical body that is you.

They’re not all the same atoms or the same molecules that were you the moment you were born; a lot of exchanges have taken place, and will

continue to do so. But for this one moment, you are the steward of that portion of the universe's atoms that are currently cobbled together to make you.

With the atomic bits of which our bodies are composed, we do whatever we do to try to leave our mark on the world.

Whether in the living world of books, or the silent world of a cemetery, I find myself, more and more as I get older, appreciating each individual contribution to the world.

In books and other artistic expressions, we have the voices, the thoughts, the ideas, the invented worlds, the theologies and philosophies autobiographies of those who came before us. They made their mark by saying something—in their time, but still being heard, in some cases, long after their time.

In cemeteries, too, are the testimonials not only to the one time existence of people who are no longer “with us,” but also to the fact that they were known, and loved—and, for a time, remembered, even when they were gone.

We do whatever it is we do to try to leave our mark on the world. Maybe it's our hubris reaching for immortality when, really, we know better. But I prefer to think it's just what we do. It values the gift we have been given, to exist and be able to function reasonably well and interact with each other and the world—and maybe, hoping against hope—having a positive impact.

We write letters, start businesses. build things, raise children, leave monuments, craft agreements, organize movements, compose works of art, invent things...

What kind of mark do we leave here? What are we part of?

According to Luke, about 2,020 years ago there was a stellar event that took place, appearing to laborers in Palestine who worked the night shift. An angel, and then an army of angels, appeared before them, and there was a divine light—“the glory of the Lord”—shining in the darkness all around them.

The shepherds were terrified, but the angel said not to be afraid, and proclaimed glory to God in heaven and peace on earth.

And then the angels took their astral light back to where they came from, and the shepherds ran to Bethlehem and saw what the angel had told them about, shared their story with Mary and Joseph, and went back to their fields rejoicing.

Not long after that, according to Matthew, there was another stellar event, this one seen somewhere in the East. Magi came to Jerusalem asking to see the child who had been born king of the Jews. They had seen in the night sky the sign which had been plainly obvious and evidently earth-shaking for them. Maybe they had been watching and waiting for it for generations.

Tom Long has described the worldview of the Gospel according to John in terms of the raw, seedy earth existing in a kind of bubble, surrounded by the cosmic Divine. Every once in a while, as recorded in John, the divine comes down like a sewing machine needle and pierces the limited, earthbound reality of our world.¹

After those stellar events took place, the unique human being whose birth they announced grew through a childhood which is shrouded in mystery and a young adulthood that seems to have gone entirely unrecorded.

About 30 years after shepherds working the night shift saw the glory of God, and magi saw a clear astral sign that something cosmically earth shaking had taken place, there was a wedding held in a town in Galilee called Cana.

Water is always a miracle, and so are giant stone water jars, and so are weddings. They are all a combination of physical, everyday, earthy elements; concerns for survival and the propagation of life; and something more, something hidden from view, something holy.

Without water, there is no life, not as we know it, anyway.

Stones hold within them the mineral secrets of the planet, a primordial memory that reaches up from the center of the earth and predates life itself. We build things out of it, and then sometimes, they build us. I offer one example: Montreat.

Well, and another example: stone can be fashioned into 30-gallon water jars for religious rites of purification.

Weddings are an occasion to forge and celebrate a union that is both cosmic and corporeal; the mystical union of two people who then will spend the rest of their time together trying to figure each other out while sharing a place together.

In pre-marital counseling, I have for decades gone over a sample list of matters about which the two partners will want to be sure they each know how the other feels. One of those is what it means to have “adequate” living space. I’ve met with lots of couples who have said, that’s not an issue; we’ll do whatever we have to do and, if necessary, be cozy. And I have always counseled them that that tends to work out for about a day before one or the other starts to feel like it would be nice to be able to go to the bathroom sometime without it being an event that the whole household knows about.

So here we are at the wedding at Cana. We don’t even know their names or who they are, but Jesus is there, thirty years after his birth was announced in the stars.

They ran out of wine; Jesus’ mother told him to do something miraculous; he said it wasn’t yet the time for him to be revealed; Mom had zero interest in his opinion, regardless of whether or not he was God—she’s still his Mom.

In the worldview of the Gospel of John, the raw, seedy earth exists in a bubble, surrounded by the cosmic Divine. Every once in a while, the Divine comes down like a sewing machine needle and pierces the limited, earthbound reality of our world.

When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, “Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have gotten plastered.

“But you have kept the good wine until now.”

“For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest,” says the Lord, “until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.

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

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

We do whatever it is we do to try to leave our mark on the world.

We write letters, start businesses. build things, raise children, leave monuments, craft agreements, organize movements, compose works of art, create inventions...

We live for only a short while on this earth, in this life.

When I was a very little kid, there was a woman on my Mom’s side of the family who was spoken of with great reverence—“Ankie.” Her husband had been the one everybody called “Uncle Ted” or just “Unc” for short. I had practically no idea who these people were; Unc died before I was born, and I think I was five when Ankie died.

But their world was the world that that side of the family knew and understood.

It was a world that was probably forever gone by the time I showed up.

And my impression was always that in that time—mainly the first half of the 20th century—they felt like that was the world as it was going to be.

But they knew their world was as impermanent as their lives.

They lived their lives in that context. They lived, and made their mark, and in God’s time, they took their places at the eternal, great banquet.

But before they got there, I would like to believe that they knew that the strivings of this life in this world are not the only part of the story.

I hope they knew that beyond our everyday dramas and melodramas, we are part of a vast, cosmic drama.

I hope they knew that, even if they could only leave a lasting mark on their own time, and even though all personal, direct memory of them died with the last of their peers and the descendants who knew them, that they still had a crucial role to play, by being present and faithful in their time.

They mattered. And you and I and every living soul out there matters.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom,
and to another the utterance of knowledge
to another faith,
to another gifts of healing,
to another the working of miracles,
to another prophecy,
to another the discernment of spirits,
to another various kinds of tongues,
to another the interpretation of tongues.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Some are good at making phone calls,
some are good at making casseroles.
Some people know just the right thing to say.
Some people know how to get things done.
Some have a knack for building bridges.

You're pretty good at something. A lot of Presbyterians can't stand to admit that—and a lot of us are just terrible at receiving compliments. Once when I complimented my best friend from seminary on one of his sermons, our disagreement became so sharp I thought we were going to get into fisticuffs.

But as you think about the person whom you and God together have made you to be—hey, you know what? You're not a bad person at all.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

You're pretty good at something, or you're particularly interested in something, or there's something you can do pretty well whether or not you mean for that to be the case.

That is a gift from God—and not just a gift to you, but to the common good.

In the earthbound drama of our daily lives,

and in the cosmic drama that pierces the hard shell of this brittle, brutal world

—giving us glimpses of the unfathomable reality of a God whose love for all of us is deeper than the oceans and more all-encompassing than the billions of galaxies full of trillions of stars—

you have a role to play: a God-given, God-blessed, God-ordained role. With your gifts.

You matter.

And you will make your mark on the world around you.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Keith Grogg
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January 17, 2016

ⁱ I'm afraid all I can offer by way of citation is that I heard Tom Long share this exquisite insight in a sermon he delivered in the summer of 2009 at Lake Junaluska.