

JANUARY 20TH, 2019: SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 62:1-5 I Corinthians 12:4-11 John 2:1-11

A frequent Bible Trivia question is, “What was Jesus’ first miracle?” If the accepted answer is, “Changing water into wine at Cana in Galilee,” the game’s creator doesn’t know Scripture. That’s Jesus’ first miracle in John, not in the other three gospels. Each evangelist’s initial miracle sets the theme for the rest of his gospel. Mark, for instance, has Jesus first exorcise a demon in the Capernaum synagogue because Mark’s Jesus believes his followers’ ministry should revolve around eradicating the evil which demons symbolize.

On the other hand, a major theme in John’s gospel revolves around his belief that Christianity replaces Judaism. What better way to show this than, as C. H. Dodd classically observed, have the wine of Christianity replace the water of Judaism. The key to appreciating this scholarly interpretation is to note the jars in which the transformation takes place aren’t empty wine jars; they’re the water jars Jews employ for their ritual purifications. According to Jewish law, once wine has been poured into them, they no longer can be used for purification.

Had the author of John’s gospel engaged in theme music, high on his list would have been the well-known song from *Annie Get Your Gun*: “Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better.” His Jesus can always be counted on to trump the Judaism of his day and age. According to his theology, the reform of Judaism which this Galilean carpenter introduced actually replaced the traditional Judaism he encountered.

In that sense, Jesus of Nazareth is living up to the concept of the “new name” which Third-Isaiah envisions. Recently freed from the Babylonian Exile, the prophet is plugging into the insight of Jeremiah. In Jeremiah’s theology, the Judaism to be practiced when the Chosen People return to Jerusalem won’t be the Judaism the Babylonians destroyed fifty years before. It’ll be a brand new faith, the one Yahweh originally wanted them to practice.

Perhaps that’s one of the reasons we should zero in on today’s I Corinthians pericope. Paul brings up something Jewish Christians deeply appreciated: the gifts which the Spirit showers on everyone in the Christian community.

Years ago when I helped screen candidates for the Permanent Diaconate in the Belleville Diocese, one of my tasks was to surface some of the gifts they’d bring to the ministry. I quickly discovered that almost never had anyone before inquired about their “spiritual gifts.” Most didn’t even realize the spirit had given them any. Raised Catholic, they bought into the unscriptural division of clergy and laity. Being a priest implied you were somehow gifted by God. Everyone else had to be content with “leftovers.” Marriage, for instance, was never regarded as a spiritual gift, it was just something everyone who wasn’t “called” to be a priest or nun was expected to do.

Paul of Tarsus would never have tolerated our clergy/laity division. As we hear in our I Corinthians passage, he presumes our imitation of the risen Jesus is much more complicated. If each of us is to be another Christ, we’re to represent Christ in a unique way. That insight was one of the ways Jesus’ reformed Judaism differed from traditional Judaism.

The Apostle clicks off just a few of those gifts for his Corinthian community, mention such things as wisdom, prophecy, tongues.

Our deacon candidates eventually discovered their gifts almost always were things they’d been good at doing their whole life; things they rarely reflected on, gifts they presumed everyone had, yet they’re unique. They simply had to ask their significant others. They told them.

Perhaps it would be helpful this weekend to participate in our parish Eucharist with a sign around our necks with our gift(s) boldly written on it. What would ours say?

JANUARY 27TH, 2019: THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Nehemiah 8:2-4a I Corinthians 12:12-30 Luke 1:1-4, 14-21

The older I get, the more I'm convinced we must constantly be reminded of the basics of our faith. If we don't, we'll eventually find ourselves in the same situation the Chosen People experienced during the time of Nehemiah and Ezra. Though they prided themselves on being the people of the covenant, many had forgotten the rules and regulations which comprised the agreement their ancestors had entered into with Yahweh. They had no idea what their covenant responsibilities actually were.

Yet, instead of lording their ignorance over them, Nehemiah and Ezra encourage them to celebrate. The day they finally discovered what Yahweh wanted them to do was sacred, holy to them and Yahweh. They had started to actually become the people God wanted them to be, living the unique contract he/she had made with them.

As a teacher of Scripture, I've at times found myself in parallel situations. In helping people return to the beginnings of our faith, I've also experienced opening eyes and ears to things some of my fellow Christians never before realized existed. Take, for instance, today's second reading.

Many of the Christians I've encountered through the years have no idea we've been blessed to be molded into the body of the risen Christ, an essential part of the covenant we've made at baptism with Jesus of Nazareth, a responsibility we can't sluff off or replace with our membership in the Catholic Church. Though most of us are content just to keep our "noses clean" and eventually squeeze into heaven, we forget that because of our baptismal covenant we've agreed to carry on the ministry of Jesus and become other Christs.

Thankfully Paul of Tarsus clearly understood that responsibility and reminded his Corinthian community about it. Since no one person can carry on Christ's ministry by herself or himself, we constantly must join together with the other "gifted" people Paul spoke about last week. Each of us plays a part; no one's contribution is insignificant. Christ's body isn't whole if any gift – no matter how "small" - is left out.

A sign we've forgotten this essential aspect of our faith has been the Catholic practice of referring to priests alone as other Christs. I certainly presume priests can be other Christs, but they became such not on the day of their ordination, but on the day of their baptism.

When Luke's Jesus announces, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing," is he speaking about what he historically is doing, or is he referring to himself/herself as the risen Christ? The majority of Scripture scholars believe it's the latter. The only Jesus our evangelist experienced was the risen Jesus. That means Luke is talking about the body of Christ that Paul spoke about.

Notice, Luke's Jesus doesn't say, "I'm fulfilling this Scripture passage;" rather he says, "It's being fulfilled." That seems to imply the people reading these words are helping in that fulfillment. All of us are bringing the glad tidings, liberating captives, giving sight to the blind, freeing the oppressed, and proclaiming a "holy" year. If we're not willing to help, God's word will never be fulfilled.

In one form or another, Christianity's been around for more than 2,000 years, far longer than our original ancestors in the faith thought it would take to evangelize the world. Perhaps one of the reasons for the delay comes from the fact that many of us accidentally threw away or lost Jesus' original plans. As the late Ed Hays frequently reminded us: "Jesus' original followers imitated him long before they worshiped him." Could we create some place in the liturgy to quote Ed at least once a month? It could easily become one of our essentials we forget.

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