

JANUARY 17TH, 2016: SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

Every three years we return to the early Christian practice of having a three feast celebration of Jesus' Epiphany: the coming of the magi, Jesus' baptism, and the wedding feast of Cana. In each, Jesus is revealed to those around him as being someone exceptional: a person who has qualities beyond those which normal human beings possess. There's a "coming out" – an epiphany - of Jesus.

Only in this year's "C cycle" is the gospel of the Second Sunday of the Year from John 2: the Cana narrative. Jesus is certainly revealed here as being exceptional. Yet, according to experts in John's gospel, the evangelist originally had more in mind than just pointing out that aspect of Jesus of Nazareth.

One of John's well-known themes is that Christianity is superior to Judaism. No doubt the evangelist would have loved the song from the 1940s musical *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better*. In exegeting this particular passage the late Johannine scholar C. H. Dodd frequently reminded his students, "John's Jesus replaces the water of Judaism with the wine of Christianity." Because Dodd understood that once Jewish purification jugs were desecrated with wine, they could no longer be employed for religious purification rituals, this was a case of the inferior being successfully replaced by the superior.

Ironically, as we hear in today's Third-Isaiah passage, Jews also believed they were superior to other people. "You shall be a glorious crown in the hand of Yahweh," the prophet announces, "a royal diadem held by your God." Can't get much more superior than that.

Yet both John and Paul would say, "Yes you can! Your faith in Jesus raises you above any other faith, even Judaism." For Paul that especially means receiving the Spirit's unique gifts. Though different, each is a manifestation of that Spirit in our daily lives. The realization that followers of the risen Jesus share in his/her Spirit was one of the pivotal insights of the early Christian community. Just as the historical Jesus was gifted by the Spirit, so now his disciples are gifted by that same Spirit.

Brainwashed by the seven gifts of the Spirit we had to memorize for Confirmation, most of us have never reflected on Paul's nine I Corinthians spiritual gifts. The traditional seven "Confirmation gifts" don't even come from the Christian Scriptures. Six of the seven are found in Isaiah 11 and have nothing to do with Jesus' Spirit. They're the gifts an ideal Jewish king is expected to possess.

I suspect we've traditionally replaced Paul's gifts with Isaiah's for the same reason the Apostle referred to them in our second reading: they can create as many tensions in the Christian community today as they did for Paul's original readers. In this particular case, some Corinthian Christians mistakenly believed all authentic followers of Jesus should be gifted with tongues, while others had it up to their eyebrows with Corinthian tongue talkers constantly interrupting community gatherings with their "holy gibberish."

Tension or no tension, Paul not only names the nine gifts, he also mentions that the Spirit has given them to specific individuals "for some benefit." He expects us to work through the tensions for the common good.

Following John's theology, if we're superior to Judaism, we should expect to have more tensions in our faith life than Judaism. We've got more gifts. It's no accident that when Luke described the Spirit's Pentecost arrival in Acts, he hooked it up with wind, fire and noise – all stressful symbols.

It's clear through the centuries that many of us have surrendered our tension-filled superiority to a non-spiritual, peaceful existence, an existence Paul and John would have judged inferior.

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JANUARY 24TH, 2016: THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10 I Corinthians 12:12-30 Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

As much as strict Jews traditionally emphasize keeping the 613 regulations of the Mosaic Law, it seems impossible that Ezra, in today's Nehemiah reading would have to deal with a Jewish community which knew nothing of those regulations. Yet Nehemiah tells us that's exactly what happened in Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile.

Though we'd expect Ezra and Nehemiah to tear into these ignorant individuals, they unexpectedly tell the people, "Do not be sad, and do not weep . . . Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks, and allot portions to those who had nothing prepared; for today is holy to Yahweh." In other words, just be happy you finally found out what Yahweh wants you to do.

Those familiar with both Scripture and church history know Ezra and Nehemiah's experience isn't an isolated event. People of faith are always susceptible to forgetting the essentials of their faith.

Today's second reading provides us with a classic example.

Back in chapter 11 of I Corinthians, Paul warns his community about the sin of "not recognizing the body" during celebrations of the Lord's Supper. We traditionally have defined this "body" as the body of Christ under the species of bread. This made sense since many of us were taught that Pius X's criterion for children receiving their first communion revolved around their ability to distinguish Eucharistic bread from regular table bread.

Yet once we look at chapter 12 – today's pericope – it's clear the body to which Paul is referring has nothing to do with bread; it's the body of Christ found in the Christian community. "As a body is one," the Apostle writes, "though it has many parts, all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. . . . Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it."

Though Paul states one of the most fundamental Christian truths, few followers of Jesus today know anything about it. It's far easier – and far less demanding - to discover the risen Jesus present in bread or wine than in one another. When we find ourselves in the presence of the former we certainly don't conceive of Jesus as actually being bread or wine. We conjure up our own personal images of him/her. We create whatever image we wish.

That can't happen when we attempt to discover Jesus in those other Christ's around us. We're forced to experience the risen Jesus in both men and women, straight and gay, white and black, Democrats and Republicans. No wonder we prefer bread over people. Like some in Paul's community, we'd like to bail out of the body of Christ. It's simply too complicated. If each of us is a part of his/her presence, which part are we? Maybe we'd prefer to be an eye instead of a foot. Yet, as Paul reminds us, "If (we) were all one part, where would the body be?"

As Luke tells us in today's gospel passage, as other Christs our role is to ". . . Bring glad tidings to the poor . . . proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." If, as the gospel Jesus says, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing," then it must be being fulfilled in our day and age. It can't just be some pie in the sky daydream.

Perhaps we rarely carry on the historical Jesus' ministry simply because we've forgotten who we are. No tears, no regrets. Just be grateful we have Paul's I Corinthians passage as a reading today. The "rich foods and sweet drink" will come later.

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