



Sermons from Northwood United Church

**“Opening to the Blessing”
1 Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11
Will Sparks January 20, 2013**

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

There is a wonderful Nigerian folk tale in which a tribal chief sent messengers to invite all the men of the tribe to a great feast. "The food will be provided but each man must bring a jug of palm wine." Now, one of the men, Ezra, wanted very much to go to the great festival but he had no wine. He paced the floor, trying to think of a solution to his problem. Finally, his wife suggested, "You could buy a jug of wine. It is not too expensive, for such a great occasion." "No!" Ezra cried, "spend money when there is a way to go, free?" "I've got it! Rather than wine, I will carry water in my jug. Several hundred men will attend the festival. What will it hurt to add one jug of water to the great vat of wine?" You know where this is going, eh?

On the day of the feast, the tribal drums began to beat early in the morning, reminding the men of the great festival. All of them came, dressed in their finest. As each man entered the tribal grounds, he poured his jug of wine into a large earthen pot. Ezra carefully poured his container into the pot, greeted the chief, and joined the dancers. When all the guests had arrived, the chief commanded the music to cease. He ordered the servants to fill everyone's glass with wine. As the chief spoke the opening words of the festival, all the guests raised their glassed and drank, not wine but water.

Gifts. Paul writes to the fractious church in Corinth, "Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same spirit, and there are a variety of services, but the same Lord; and there are a variety of activities, but the same God who activates all of them in everyone."

Some things it may be helpful to know about this letter to the church in Corinth: here's a letter from about 54 AD - just 20 years or so after Jesus' time- and it's full of directions for solving arguments. This would indicate that direction was necessary. In other words they were not getting along.

Now Corinth: Corinth had a kind of a Vegas quality to it. A port town, a century or so before it was defeated in a war and rebuilt by the Romans, so the architecture was new and it was full of people from all over the ancient world. These people brought their own religions and customs. Corinth had more than two dozen temples to various gods. Many of these gods were worshipped in ways that would seem strange to us. They slaughtered animals and held huge barbecues; they offered temple prostitutes. It was a kind of wild place.

And the church? A few of them are rich; most are poor. Some of them had ecstatic experiences, they called "speaking in tongues"; others thought that was kind of wierd. Some were conservative about worship and wanted the old hymns exclusively; others put together a praise band and made up a whole new song book. Some said clapping was unhelpful to the worship of others and some thought it was just a spirited expression of joy and what's the problem. They began to growl at each other; their worship split into factions. What to do? What to you say? Sounds like a bit of a mess doesn't it? Sounds like a -human community- a family.

I think it was John Crossan who once said: "Jesus called us to the Kingdom of God and what he got was the church." And Ralph Milton once said "in Cana Jesus turned water into wine, and ever since the church has been trying to turn it back into water." Well there is a grain of truth in the words of both of these gentlemen, and yet truth be told, the church is a human organism

which bears the unmistakable marks of our humanity, and God created our humanity, loves our humanity dearly and that love extends to the church.

And I love the church. I am a little out of step with many of peers in that way because so many friends and family my age don't understand why I stick with the church when they perceive it as perhaps quaint but largely inflexible and irrelevant. But frankly, when I see what the church is trying to do in Guatemala, when I listen in small groups as 8 people start by sharing what is actually going on in their lives, the real stuff of life, when I listen to what is talked about at Prayer Shawls, Bible study, Seniors, when I watch what is happening at Children's Choir where children have the opportunity to express what is in them freely with a loving leader like Cheryl... I could go on and on. In a city in which it can be lonely, and it can be really hard to find community, the church is a place where the precious gifts of God given in human form are cherished. No it is not everything, it is not the Kingdom of God in all its fullness, and it is not always smooth, but by God's grace it is community, and I think God loves that.

We are called to be community, to be an expression of the Kingdom of God- not mere water but the wine of Cana, a community in which everyday commonplace gifts are offered and yet become something more- the wine of celebration by the transforming, activating power of the Holy Spirit.

Do you think of yourself as spiritually gifted? If you are Canadian, I am guessing the answer is no. We in the Canadian United church have a different problem than the church in Corinth. Whereas they thought too much of their individual gifts and ended up competing, I believe we tend to be self-deprecating about them. We under-inflate the significance of our gifts, which can lead us to complacency to expect little, and to offer little, to under-estimate what God is up to in us.

One theologian suggested we look at it this way. Our gifts are less given to us than assigned to us. They are our assignments. And so they are not just pleasurable extras or quirks, but something God assigns to us purposefully. And to minimize them is to minimize God's purpose in us. So part of our job is to do the treasure hunt that helps us discover these gifts and then to use them in service. There is this wonderful aboriginal folk tale in which the Creator got all the people together- all that is, except the human people. The otter people, the salmon people, the buffalo people, the eagle people, the mole people, all gathered. And the Creator brought to all these people a problem.

"I have a wonderful gift," the Creator began. "I am worried though, because this is a gift of creation. This is a gift of healing. This is a gift of life. And I am worried that the human people are going to find it, and they are not ready for this gift. It is a powerful gift, and so I want to hide it for a while until they grow up a bit, but I don't know where to hide it."

The salmon people suggested deep in the sea but the creator said, no, they will go there some day and find it. The Eagle people said way up on the highest peak but the creator said, no, they are climbers. They will get there some day. The Buffalo people said they could hide it in the prairie grass, far from the human people, but the creator knew that someday the humans would till the prairie and find it. The mole people offered to bury it deep in the ground but the creator said, no, some day they will dig looking for rocks, and find it there too.

Well the discussion kept going on and one until a long silence fell upon the people. Suddenly the Creator looked up and smiled, and when the Creator smiles, it is like the sun is shining in the morning. "I know where we will hide this great and precious gift. We will hide it inside them. They will never look there."

Over the next couple of weeks I want to invite you into a treasure hunt of sorts, to look inside, into your own cupboard and see what's there, discern, discover, see what gems God has purposefully placed in you. We are going to explore the gifts of God given here among us. As Canadians, that may be a struggle. But you are on this planet for a purpose. The Kingdom of God

breaks in when two or three gather and discern the gifts, and then offer what they have been given purposefully. When that happens, it's the wine of Cana, it's the stuff of abundant life, there is a glimmer of the Kingdom of God. Amen.