The Good Wine Last January 19, 2025

(1 Cor 12:4-11; John 2:1-11) Rev. James Koyama

We are in the season of Epiphany that follows Christmas. And so it's a good time to consider the main idea for the season. And a good way to do this is to reflect on the word "Epiphany" itself . Basically the word "Epiphany" refers to how something that is hidden is revealed. So, firstly it refers to how God has been revealed as alive and active in our midst through the birth of Jesus.

There are lots of good ways to imagine how we can experience this. One is hidden in the word itself. The "phany" in the word Epiphany is the same "phane" that is in our word cellophane; that thin sheet of plastic we use to cover up food in a bowl.

But in this case we are talking about a thin veil that separates the world we can see and touch from the greater reality that includes heaven. It is a thin veil which prevents us from having a clear and direct view of God's hand at work in the world. So that, much of the time, we are guessing and using our intuition to put turn those occasional moments when we do see clearly, into a reasonable understanding of what God is doing.

And those moments of clarity come to us when God/ Christ and Holy Spirit are all aligned for us in what we call the Sacraments. The sacraments are those moments when we are connected more directly with God in those places where the veil is thinnest. That is why we call Communion a Sacrament. And it is why we call Baptism a sacrament.

As we saw last week with the baptism of Jesus, the veil separating heaven and earth opened up and God spoke to Jesus directly from heaven and said, "You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased." That moment is the only time in the entire New Testament in which God speaks directly and in the first person. And he speaks to Jesus the words of affirmation and acceptance that every son or daughter longs and needs to hear.

And, as Rev. Sadler-Twyon said last week, this break in the veil and these words of God, while they are specifically meant to direct us to Jesus, are also words that are meant for us. They express how God feels about each one of us, in spite of our waywardness. They are words that assure us that we are as much loved by God as anyone else, whether we think we are loveable or not.

So part of the message of Jesus's baptism is that, God is revealed as being present with us in a special way in Jesus, and that he entered

into our lives, so that the heavens might be opened for us as well; so that we might also experience the presence of heaven more directly than we do, since very often it is hidden from us by our worldly concerns.

An Epiphany

Last Sunday was something of an "epiphany" experience for me. Having spent the last few weeks rolling around an empty house to the sad groaning of my walker wheels, it seemed that the sermon opened a hole for me to glimpse into heaven or, at the very least, the veil separating heaven and earth seemed very thin.

After seeing so few people for so long, I felt a slight and pleasant shock at seeing all your faces and being surrounded by you all in worship. As Sheryl spoke of the hole that opened up for Christ in the heavens, I felt a hole opening up for me too, and the warmth of grace flowing into me through it, as my eyes swept around the room and took in your faces. And incidentally, what was coming to me had everything to do with the subject of this morning's second reading, which is all about appreciating the different people and gifts that make up the "Body of Christ."

It is a kind of Epiphany to experience the truth that Christ himself and the gathered congregation, as the "Body of Christ" are not two different things. They are not the same. But in those sacramental moments, we see that they are also inseparable. Your flesh and your faces are Christ's face and flesh. Your deeds, when they are done in response to the Holy Spirit, are Christ's good deeds. And feeling that Christ is present with us as we are present with each other is a pretty heady even rapturous experience.

A Repeatable Experience

One of the things I've come to realize over time is that you can have the same Epiphany experience over and over without its being diminished in any way. I think it is because, as busy human beings we easily forget even the most impressive things. But when those experiences come back to us, if they are truly genuine, they always feels new.

So, I've had this experience several times before. The first time was at the beginning of my ministry, when I was Seminary student. I was serving a church in DeKalb, Illinois, just west of the Chicago. And on Sundays after church, as I was driving home through the waving fields of corn toward Chicago, the members of the congregation would linger in my mind. And as I thought about them, I know that I

had a big smile on my face and sometimes my eyes would glaze over with so many joyful tears, that I had to wipe them away so that I could see the road.

I would be weeping like a drunk. You could say that I was intoxicated, drunk on church. And if I had been pulled over, the officer would have been surprised that, with such a foolish grin on my face, I wasn't registering on the breathalizer.

Because when the veil between heaven and earth grows thin like this, a good congregation can have an effect on you like a glass of fine wine; which is why it seems to me that today's Gospel reading in which Jesus turns water into wine fits very nicely with Paul's description of the different members of a congregation working together as the "Body of Christ."

A good congregation, like a fine wine is always an interesting combination of flavors working together, or take a good quilt. The most interesting quilts are often made up of a combination of colors that you don't think will work, until they are come together in a way that somehow works and you can't put your finger on why.

And the answer to the why, when it comes to a congregation coming together is that somewhere along the way Jesus slips in and works his magic, turning our ordinary experiences into fine wine.

It seems to me that this kind of delight in how diversity can be joined to form a more beautiful whole, is at the heart of the great dream of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., whose birthday we celebrate this weekend. He saw beauty in the possibility of children of every color playing together in a world in which none of them would be denied the love and affirmation that God intends them to have. And he encouraged us to make that dream a reality.

Patience

Part of the tragedy of our culture, I think, is that, when it comes to being part of a congregation, so many people today lack patience. They take a sip and spit it out, when it would taste much better if they would let it breathe in the glass for a bit, then take a few sips and savor the flavors and subtleties.

And maybe that is one reason why, in the story of Jesus turning the water into wine, the host remarks that the best wine came last. First there is a "not seeing" and a "not understanding." But in the mystery and miracle of Christ, if we are willing to trust him and wait for him to make his move, he somehow slips into what we experience as ordinary community and turns it into extraordinary community; turning the life we are drinking into the equivalent of a heady and inspiring glass of wine, rich with undertones.

Proof in the Pudding

I feel like I hit the jackpot when I was taken as a young Seminary intern at that church in De Kalb, Illinois. Right off the bat, I recognized a truth that today's stereotypes about churches people fail to reveal. And that is, that a lifetime of church going had produced in that congregation some of the most profoundly good and inspiring people I had ever met. Humble, trustworthy, honest, patient and caring people with open and joyful hearts ready to embrace you; the kind of people cynical people don't believe can even exist. People who make you feel like a better person just by knowing them. And that epiphany of "God with us" has found a way to break its way into my life again and again over the years.

And so, my purpose this morning is to encourage us to think of this season of Epiphany as one in which God has left very thin spots in the veil through which each of us can experience more directly and powerfully and personally the blessing of God. And one of those places is right here in this community of faith that we share.