

1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-11 (p. 931)

JANUARY 16, 2022

JOHN 2:1-11 (p. 861)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, you have Blessed us with so many gifts, some of which we are not even aware of. We thank you for each and every one, and ask you to help us use them to further your Kingdom. And even with so many Blessings Lord, we ask for yet one more. Please illuminate our minds and prepare our hearts, as we study today. So, that we will glorify you as we respond to your Word. In Jesus' Name we ask this, Amen.

“NOW, ABOUT SPIRITUAL GIFTS”

According to the experts, there is a noticeable downside to the flood of Zoom meetings happening over the last couple of years. Apparently, people are spending an inordinate amount of time looking at themselves on the screen, far more than they ever looked at themselves prior to the pandemic. And for the most part, they are not happy with what they see. Have you ever done that? Looked at, how you look? Or, have you ever wondered what other people see when they look at you? I'm not talking vanity here, how amazing you think you appear physically. I'm asking about your actions, and your words, how they come across. What is it that people see?

There was a new Pastor at the local Church. It was his very first week, in fact. And on the way from his apartment to the Post Office, he spotted a beer bottle on the landing at the top of his stairs. Trying to do the right thing, he stopped to pick it up, intending to throw it away.

Only as he did, he turned a bit too quickly, lost his balance, and stumbled all the way down the stairs, bobbing and weaving, tripping and slipping, clutching that empty bottle the entire way! He landed in a heap at the bottom of the stairs, dazed and confused, still clinging to that empty beer bottle. And looking up, he discovered the entire Women's Ministries Group" standing there, holding a Welcome Gift in their hands! What do people see when they look at you?

You know we are being watched, right, in both the good times and the bad! And as Christians, we're not only watched by other believers, but by non-believers as well. People notice things! They notice the right and the wrong, the true and the simply perceived. They watch what we do, and what we fail to do. They hear what we say and what we don't. And they make decisions based on those perceptions. Lasting decisions. Sometimes eternal decisions. So, what do people see?

Remember when John the Baptist was in prison? He sent a couple of his Disciple to Jesus with a question; "Are you the One who was to come, the Messiah, or should we look for someone else?" Jesus' answer is telling. He said, "What do you see?" "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to new life, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor!" Jesus was pointing to the fulfillment of Isaiah's Prophecy. At the coming of Messiah, Isaiah said, "The eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. The lame will leap like a deer, and the mute tongue will shout for joy"! So, Jesus asks, "What do you see?"

And then He adds something that I've always found interesting. He says, "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble, or fall away, on account of me". I like that! I think it's important. In fact, I think it should be a Christian mantra. "Blessed is anyone who does not fall away on account of me". What we say and do really matters, doesn't it! The good, the bad, and the ugly! Our actions point to who we are! They witness to what we believe! And "Blessed", or "Happy", literally, "Filled with Joy", are those who do not fall away on account of me!

Last week, we talked about being "God's Chosen People", remember, a Holy Nation, a Royal Priesthood, The Body of Christ. We are Beloved Sons and Daughters of Almighty God. So today I thought maybe, we should consider some of our "Family Values"! You see, people are watching!

Paul, in his First Letter to the Church in Corinth, says "I don't want you to be "uninformed", Brothers and Sisters. It's translated "ignorant" in other versions. I want you to know the Truth, he says, to understand the Truth! God has given each and every Believer certain "Spiritual Gifts"! And these "Gifts, these "manifestations of the Holy Spirit" are given "just as He determines"!

Paul states that God has a plan! And in order to achieve that plan, God has Blessed each one of us with unique talents and abilities! God distributes these just as He sees fit! And each "Gift", says Paul, is given "for the common good"! Don't miss that part, because that's really the point!

We all have God-given abilities, talents, things we can do! Whether we know it or not! Whether we actually use them or not! And these Spiritual Gifts have been bestowed upon us for the edification of the Body of Christ! It is not about you and me? It's about the Church, the entire Body of Christ!

So, back to the question. If people are watching, and they are, then we need to constantly ask ourselves; "What it is that they see". You are the face of Christianity, a Chief Witness to Jesus. And your mission is to go and make Disciples. Your life speaks about what it means to be "His Church". Together, we are the face of Christianity. And how we use our God-given gifts to further the Kingdom, speaks volumes about what it means to be "The Body of Christ". And here is the thing. "Blessed" are those who do not fall away on account of what we say and do.

If you doubt that you are being watched, look at the young people around you. Hudson, my grandson, used to hold his lower back and make grunting noises whenever he went down the stairs. Believe me, I know where that came from! My granddaughter Amara, after only a few days with me this summer, picked up the phrase, "let's put some groceries in our neck", when she was hungry! And my one-year-old granddaughter Izzy, who never stops moving for a second, on New Year's Day while Deb and I were kneeling in prayer, came up and laid her hand on our hands and kept it there until we were done! We are watched! All the time!

Walk into any Elementary School part way through the year, and ask almost any kid what teacher they want next year, and you'll get instant answers. They know who is nice, and who is not. They see who is fair, and who is not. They know who smiles and who doesn't. Most can even tell you what kind of clothes they wear. We are watched.

We watch Professional Athletes and Celebrities, don't we? I am not sure why, but we do. We watch people in positions of authority, government officials and Business Executives, and those who are currently trying to get there. We watch Doctors and Nurses, Pastors and Lawyers, even the Cashier in the checkout lane. And it breaks our heart when they let us down, doesn't it? We watch family and friends. We watch those working alongside of us at Church, maybe especially those who work alongside of us at Church! We watch. And we listen. And if we do, then those outside of the Church do it as well. Seekers are looking at us, wondering what this Jesus thing is really all about.

Are those Christians sincere, or just putting on a show? Do they believe what they profess to believe? Am I seeing love, and acceptance, and forgiveness? Do I notice the "Fruits of the Spirit"? You know, Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-Control? Or do I see something else? What do people see?

Did you notice that in our Gospel lesson today, the Apostle John calls the miracle at Cana a "sign"? We notice signs, don't we? That's the point! And as a professional sign guy, I can assure you that no sign is designed to point to itself. All the miracles point to Jesus! Just as our gifts, given to us by the Spirit of God, point to Jesus!

We are “Living Signs”, aren’t we? Signs of what it means to be part of God’s Family! So, could that make us “potential miracles” as well? I wonder! What is it that people see?

Jesus’ first miraculous “sign”, takes place at a Wedding in Cana. We know it, right. But did you know that John only mentions seven miracles in his entire Gospel—far less than Matthew, or Mark, or Luke. And the first one, the one that introduces Jesus’ ministry, shows us a lot!

Some of the things that I notice, for instance, are that it takes place in the middle of everyday life, in midst of the ordinary, at a wedding. And the results of this sign, notice, are that “Jesus’ Glory is revealed” and the “Disciples put their faith in Him”. That’s actually the point of all Christian Signs, isn’t it! “Jesus’ Glory is revealed”! And those watching, “put their faith in Him”!

This sign begins with an ordinary human need. In this case, the wedding hosts have run out of wine. That might seem trivial to us, especially when you compare it with healing the sick or feeding the hungry. But even that says something, doesn’t it? Our moment may appear minor at the time.

Notice though, that Jesus responds to this everyday need in an extravagant way. There is a huge quantity of wine produced, 180 gallons! And it’s of far better quality than that which was previously served! The need wasn’t just met, it was overwhelming addressed!

Have you ever been completely out of wine? Or know someone who has? Metaphorically speaking? Have you ever been completely empty, drained, thirsting for something, maybe something you once had? Wine is a symbol of sustenance, which is why it's used with bread at Communion. Wine is a symbol of joy and happiness, of life itself, of celebration, of tranquility and peace. So, have you ever run completely out of wine? It is in that emptiness that Jesus creates a super abundance, an overwhelming refilling. And He provides a better quality than has ever been experienced before. What does that say?

I notice that the Lord uses jars designed for ceremonial washing. These are ordinary jars, intended for cleansing, jars designed to make the "common" "Holy", and therefore, presentable to God. What does that say? I notice that there are six of them, the biblical number associated with man. So, through Jesus, something ordinary becomes a vessel with a Holy purpose, a vessel used to give God Glory.

You might notice in this sign, that there is a timetable for Jesus' ministry. God really does have a plan. Our Lord says to His mother, "my time has not yet come". You might see that Mary has the Gift of Faith, because she turns to the servants anyway and says, "Do whatever He tells you to".

You might recognize that John is saying to the Church, the Bride of Christ, that Wedding Ceremonies are important. And you might realize that miracles, like this one, often take place on the "third day". You might just see a lot, if you look.

Maybe you can tell that Mary, obviously, has the Gift of Compassion. She is attending a wedding, a multiple-day celebration in that time. She is a guest, not one of the Wedding Party, and not the person catering the meal. And we know that because, if she were in a position of responsibility, Jesus and His friends would have immediately jumped in to help with the issue! They wouldn't have asked what the lack of wine had to do with them! "Shame" and "Honor" were defining social categories for people in the First Century world, much like "Failure" and "Success" are today. If Mary was responsible in any way, Jesus would have leapt on the problem immediately!

Those social mantles of "Honor" and "Shame" witness to Mary's compassion as well. To run out of wine at a Wedding Feast would have been a major crisis. It was a social faux pas that would have lasted for generations to come. It would have been far more than a simple disappointment. It would have been a failure, a "failure to fulfill your duty" to the entire community. Can you imagine?

The host would not have been considered a "tightwad" or a "party pooper", but rather something far worse! The stigma would have been applied to his or her descendants forever! They might not ever recover from it! "Oh, I know you. You're the one whose great grandma ran out of wine at that Wedding in Cana"!

Maybe you can see that Mary grasps the need in this immanent dilemma, and responds immediately. She notices a problem, the "Gift of Insight". Feels the pain, the "Gift of Empathy". And immediately starts doing something about it, the "Gift of Service".

Mary's heart-felt compassion is real and obvious. She doesn't stand off, over in the corner, shaking her head in disgust. Nor does she simply ignore the problem. She doesn't complain that "things are not the way they are supposed to be". She moves into action and tries to make them right! Mary doesn't throw her hands up in the air and walk away either, as if it isn't her problem. She gets involved, and does so quickly. That might be something for us to glean from this sign. A lot of people tend to notice a potential crisis. But only a few actually turn that knowledge into action! So, if you were watching, what would the things you see, say to you?

I notice a few of Jesus' "Gifts" here as well. For instance, He responds with the "Gift of Obedience". He does what his mother tells Him to do—reluctantly at first, because Jesus wants to be "Obedient" to His Heavenly Father as well, making sure that the time is right for His identity to be revealed. But even that tells us that He has the "Gift of Discernment".

We see the "Gift of Humility" in our Lord. He doesn't perform this sign with great Pomp and Circumstance. He just quietly tells the servants to fill the water jars, and then take the New Wine to the Master of the Banquet.

He doesn't stand on the stage and point at Himself. He allows the earthly Honor to flow to the family of the Bride and Groom, and the Heavenly Glory to be given to Almighty God. That's something we definitely need to see! And yet, in this unselfish act, Jesus' Glory is revealed, much as it is when He washed the Disciple's feet.

We, too, have all been given Spiritual Gifts. “To each one,” it says, “just as He determines”. And each of these, is given “for the common good,” in order to witness to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

So, imagine being “Blessed” with some gift, a gift designed to be shared with, and for, others. Christmas wasn’t that long ago, so picture Christmas morning where one child gets a football, another receives a puzzle, and a third opens up a table game. None of the gifts are the same. And yet the intention of the parents is that they will all enjoy them together. Now imagine how that mom and dad would feel if their children just laid them aside. They didn’t use them! They didn’t share them! I’ll bet it would break their heart, don’t you?

There are different kinds of Gifts, we’re told, but they all come from the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all people.

Don’t think that the Church in Corinth was a perfect place! It was not! It was horribly divided! There were factions, and arguments, and people pulling against each other! Some people thought this was the direction to go, and some people thought that was it. Some people really liked the current pastor, and some liked the one who wasn’t there anymore. It’s not hard to extrapolate that Church to almost any Church today, is it? Therefore, the points in our lessons still very much apply.

You are the Body of Christ, and people are watching you, watching to see if they want to be grafted onto the Christian Vine! You are the Bride of Christ, the Lord's Beloved, and people are looking at you to see if you are faithful to your Marriage Vows, faithful to that commitment!

You are God's Chosen People, a Holy Nation, a Royal Priesthood, just like we talked about last week! You are Holy, and Dearly Loved! And you have been set apart for a purpose, to be a sign that points to God's Glory, so that people will put their faith in Jesus Christ! You have been "Gifted" to share the Good News, in various ways! Which brings us back to our original question, doesn't it? When people look at you, when they look at us, what is it that they see? And all of God's people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

We are so honored Lord, to come together and worship you, to stand in your Glorious Presence, praising your Holy Name! Like Mary, Lord, we feel highly favored to be called as your people, to be a sign and a witness to you with all that we say and do. We are privileged, Lord, Blessed really, to be part of this Community of Faith that meets with you each week. And so, we thank you for this wonderful gift.

Lord, we also thank you for all the wonderful gifts that have poured out upon us. Please help us now to use them in ways that glorify you. Please encourage us, and enable us, and nudge us Lord, if that's what's needed—to act in ways that share the Good News.

Lord we often stumble on our journey towards you. And sometimes we even fall flat on our face. Please, when we do, pick us up again and brush us off and make us clean. Set us on our feet Lord, on the right path, and give us a shove to help us walk. Forgive our slips, or when we are overwhelmed with inertia, or when we are simply too stubborn to move. Help us to use all the gifts that we have been given by You, to not only walk the walk ourselves, but to also guide others along the way. And pour out your power upon us, Lord, so that we will never stop moving closer to you.

Lord, there are so many beautiful vistas along the way, and so many pitfalls that we need to avoid. And there are so many fellow travelers with hurts and wounds. In fact, we sometimes become numb to these, or take them for granted, or get so mired in the mud that we just obliviously trudge alone! So please, help us to count the blessings of each step that we take, and to shoulder the burdens of others along the way.

This morning, Lord, we lift up before you.....And we do this, as we pray together the very prayer that Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father...