

John 2:1-11
Isaiah 62:1-5

1/17/16—Epiphany 2C

Psalm 36:5-10 (UMH 771)
I Corinthians 12:1-11

The Best Is Yet To Be

When you were a kid, did you ever have to eat one particular item on your plate—you know, like broccoli or spinach—before you could have what you *really* wanted to eat? How many of you have had that experience?

One person, when he was a little boy, was made to sit at the table until he ate his Brussels sprouts. He sat there for several hours! Someone else remembers having to finish his stewed squash before he could have anything else to eat. I, personally, had to eat liver. For breakfast!

When we were kids, loving parents knew—and know today—that nutritious food helps children stay healthy. So that’s why parents often say, “You have to eat all your vegetables before you can have dessert.” Dessert! Pie. Ice cream. Cake. Cookies. They’re sweet. Scrumptious! Luscious! Delectable! They’re in a food group all by themselves—as far as kids are concerned—a food group which has no equal. Which—as far as kids are concerned—is simply the best. At an early age, we begin learning to save the best for last.

That lesson was reinforced as we grew, because some of our parents—including my own dear mother—had a favorite saying: “Business before pleasure.” They taught us to do our homework and chores first—not only because they wanted us to, but also because if we did, we would enjoy playtime more than if we goofed off with work hanging over our heads. Save the best for last, they taught us.

When we got a little older, we may have started dating. And sometimes when we did, we met someone and spent a period of time getting to know him or her before discovering that—for one reason or another—that person wasn’t right for us. So it may have happened that we moved on and kept repeating the process until, finally, we may have been blessed to meet “the one”—that special person who would be a life partner, a spouse. And once again, we learned that the best often comes along last.

In maturity, doesn’t it seem as though we have more to offer one another? Life experience brings mellowing. Gentleness and gratitude. Wisdom and serenity. An old song reminds us that *love, like youth, is wasted on the young*. And Robert Browning puts it poetically: *Grow old along with me! / The best is yet to be, / The last of life, for which the first was made.*

The best is yet to be!

But, you know, the prevailing culture around us doesn't see it quite that way. We live in an instant-gratification kind of world. Our parents and grandparents saved their money for major purchases and—until they could pay cash—they did without. But we live in a time when we're urged to boost the economy. To get what we want when we want it. To buy it now, on credit, and not be concerned about how we're going to have to pay for it later. Twenty-first century people get deluged with messages urging us not to wait, but to acquire it all *right now*. Twenty-first century people get bombarded with continuous messages insinuating that the biggest, the costliest, the most luxurious are to be objects of our desire. That whatever's high-end and upscale is to receive our adulation.

We live in an idolatrous society.

In many ways, it's a society very like that of first-century Corinth. Where Paul writes to Christians who haven't been Christians very long. Up until just a few years before receiving this letter from Paul, the members of First Church Corinth were idol-worshipping pagans.

But Paul wants the Corinthians to know that ever since they confessed Christ as Lord, their lives have been radically changed by the Spirit who makes that confession possible. Once they'd been pagans, but now they are Spirit-gifted people. The best part of their lives has come not first, but last.

Every follower of Jesus has been given at least one Spiritual gift. Not only the Corinthians, but each one of you, as well, has been given one or more of these gifts of the Holy Spirit. Later in this service of worship, we will install this year's church officers. These are persons who willingly share their gifts for the good of the faith community—but they're not the only ones.

I see so many of you sharing your gifts. Making music that glorifies God. Maintaining and caring for church property. Providing the elements of the Lord's Supper and setting his Table. Counting and recording and depositing financial offerings to the church. Serving in ministries of hospitality. Teaching and testifying to your faith. Enhancing and enriching the worship life we share. Keeping us connected to other believers and ministries in our district and Conference. Being in mission to the least of these who are members of Christ's family. And serving in

numerous other ways. I am blessed to be your pastor, for you are a people on whom God's Spirit has bestowed many gifts.

In today's Fourth Gospel reading, Jesus himself has a gift for a family celebrating a wedding at Cana of Galilee. Now, John tells us that Jesus, with his mother and his disciples, is a guest at this wedding. Jesus is not the host. He's not responsible for providing food and drink. But the thing is, the wine's all gone. And that represents a major problem—because, in the ancient Near East, water is scarce and often not fit to drink. So, instead, first-century folk drink wine.

And a first-century wedding is a great community festival. The whole village would be invited. They'd gather at the groom's house. They'd dance and they'd drink and they'd feast and they'd rejoice over the newly married pair. And typically, the celebration would go on for a *week!*

But at *this* wedding, the festivities are about to come to a screeching halt. Running out of wine would be considered a serious breach of hospitality. And the family would be greatly embarrassed. Disgraced. Shamed!

So even though he's there as a guest, Jesus acts—in response to human need. Jesus acts with compassion. Quietly,

unobtrusively, Jesus takes a copious amount of water—not even drinking water, but *washing* water. And he transforms it into wine. According to John’s Gospel, this is the first of Jesus’ miracles, the first of his wondrous signs. But the Evangelist wants to be sure you understand: Jesus’ wine is not just any wine. No. It’s *amazing* wine! It’s the best wine that anyone has ever tasted.

When the headwaiter tastes some of this great abundance of wine—not knowing its source—he’s incredulous. He pulls the bridegroom off to one side, his voice low and full of astonishment. *I can’t believe it! At an event like this, people always serve the finest vintages first. Then, later, when the guests have been drinking freely and can’t taste the difference anymore, they bring out the cheap stuff. “But you have kept the good wine until now!”*

The best is kept for last. When you bring your need to Jesus, you end up with the best.

And that’s how the story of God’s saving activity with God’s people ends up, too—with the best. The Scriptures are filled with accounts of ordinary people who, in the doing of extraordinary things, fulfill divine purposes. Abraham. Moses. Ruth. David. Elijah. Esther. And many others. Patriarchs, matriarchs, and

prophets—like John the Baptizer. All of them, servants of God. But there was none like Jesus the Christ.

In Jesus' grace-filled self, his glory is revealed. In the miraculous gift at Cana, his glory is revealed. In all his signs and wonders, his glory is revealed. In his death and in his blessed resurrection and ascension, his glory is revealed. In Jesus, the best is saved for last.

And we see this truth clearly. For in the prophecy of Isaiah, God speaks to people who have been in exile—to the people of Israel, and to us today. Like those long-ago people, have you and I not spent some time in exile? Do you remember a season of your life when you felt very much alone? When all that was dear and familiar seemed far away? When the landscape of your existence appeared dark and desolate? When names of diminishment echoed in your ears? When it felt as though you had been rejected and were utterly without hope?

Isaiah's words look to a time when all that is behind you. Now that your life is in Christ, you'll no longer need to be ashamed of the past or afraid of what is to come. You'll no longer feel deserted. You'll no longer feel forsaken. Instead, you'll be a beautiful creation, held in the palm of God's own hand. You'll be

drawn into intimate relationship with the One who made you. And you'll know in the depths of your being that your God rejoices over you.

You will know this because God will call you by a new name—a name of loving affirmation. God will call you *My Delight Is in Her. My Delight Is in Him*. God takes great pleasure in you. Yes, you! You are filled with the hope of experiencing the glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The future is bright. The best is yet to be!

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.