

# Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas

January 20, 2019

Isaiah said a mouthful when he told Israel: "The Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married." Then, just so there's no mistake, he clarified, "As a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you."

At a time in their history when Israel had been absolutely skunked and had scarcely begun to crawl back, their God presented himself to them no longer as the remote God of thunder and lightning on Mount Sinai, but rather as God intimate as a spouse with all the hope for fertility that marriage carries with it.

Such a marriage of God with creation helps explain why the ancient Christian church made such a big deal out of Jesus' role in the wedding feast at Cana. Epiphany, the feast of Jesus' manifestation as the Son of God in power and light, was originally celebrated in three equal parts on three successive Sundays. Sadly, the church lost sight of that original way of doing things over the centuries.

The first Epiphany of the three Epiphany Sundays was, of course, what we modern Christians think of exclusively as Epiphany: the Magi who followed the star to Bethlehem. The second Sunday we observed last week, though we don't think of it as Epiphany any longer. Our loss. I'm speaking of the Baptism of Jesus when the skies were ripped open in an epiphany of light and power and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus. The third Sunday of Epiphany, however, we have lost almost entirely, because we observe it in the Episcopal Church only once every three years. That would be today, and it is the manifestation of Jesus in light and power at the wedding in Cana. In the ancient church, Cana had the same "Epiphany" standing as the three wise men.

For there is a progression across these three Epiphanies that we have also lost to us in the modern church. It goes like this: With the Magi, Jesus entered the world and was recognized as extraordinary. In the Baptism, the union of heaven and earth in the person of Jesus was revealed. At Cana, the coming marriage of God with mankind was revealed to be the end result of all this epiphany. Thus, we experience the movement of God's light and power from the heavens, through Jesus, right into us where our light is the light of God.

With Cana as his starting point, Jesus' mission and ministry aims at ending people's isolation by sin in order to embrace life in such union with each other that the creation of new life inevitably follows. The agenda for Jesus' mission, therefore, is not about God meeting *our* fears or desires.

Jesus' mission is so much more than we could desire or pray for. Jesus' mission is to *marry us to God*.

God means for our life together in the community of the church to be as powerful as marriage. Marital union with God, and with one another in God, generates health, prosperity, peace and new life right here, right now. God does not aim at some form of salvation away off in heaven after the end of life but right now, in full union with our maker.

If you're paying attention, that might make you squirm. Apart from whatever our individual experiences in marriage might be – and I realize that some folks have had some pretty harsh experiences in marriage – just being that close to God can be disturbing. Even if God is the considerate spouse who always puts the seat down, it's still a lot easier to picture God as our judge at the end of time way far off in the future than it is to picture him as a partner in spiritual marriage with daily give and take, intimate personal accountability, and the need to need to love and be loved with all our heart, right here, right now.

Similarly, we, in the church, might squirm at being so intimately bound to each other. It's one thing to experience emotional intimacy in our own households. It's something entirely different to contemplate such vulnerability out in the open in a place like church.

Perhaps a better way to think of it, then, is that Epiphany brings us into the world of the two great commandments where we love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength and where we love our neighbor as ourselves. The power of spousal intimacy and family life are the best image we can get in our minds of what living the two great commandments really is like.

Listen to the way Paul describes a communion of spiritually married people in his incredible letter to the Corinthian church. Paul writes in the spirit of the affectionate old cliché of one spouse saying to another, "You complete me." By ourselves, we are all incomplete, so Paul's vision is that when we come together in loving community, we complete each other, no longer inadequate or insufficient. There are varieties of human gifts, Paul says, varieties of service, varieties of activities in the community, but they all come together when we realize that they are married in the same, single Holy Spirit.

So, you have gifts that I don't have (believe me, you don't want me swinging a hammer). I can do things that you can't do. The same for all of us. Our responsibilities lie in different areas, and none of us is responsible for everything. There are no superheroes here. None of us should feel defensive about what we're incapable of because there is somebody else we love who is. Paul tells us that when we succeed at being a "married" church, we are collectively the body of Christ in the world. That's how powerful church is.

Any church should take Paul's vision of communion as seriously as we take our marriages. We all know how destructive to marriage things are like jealousy, abandonment, passive aggressiveness, pouting and self-pity, retaliation, abuse, withdrawal of affection and so on and on. These things are sins that destroy family life, heightened because the family brings us so close to one another.

The church community is no different. So, when our brother or sister offends us, don't blow it off or hold a grudge. We go to that person and work out the problem and restore the bonds of love. We should think first of the wounds to joy and the hope for peace in our household; not of our wounded pride and our childish desire for "fairness." And none of should ever say, or even think, of one another, "I have no need of you."

Similarly, when we see a member of the community withdrawing into isolation, we are called to pursue that person just as we would pursue a brother or sister in

trouble at home. We might shrug and ignore the problems of somebody who lives up the street and never comes out of his house, but none of us would ignore a brother or sister under our own roof who never comes out of their room and emotionally wanders away from the family. It's the same way with a member of your church family.

Our community is our life, particularly because the world outside is so toxic these days. Here's a telling example of the power of toxicity. For many years, in the nation of Rwanda, national radio was basically hate radio, which helped greatly to promote the genocide, you will recall, that nation suffered. But there was something odd about that radio transmission. Accidents of geography and the location of transmission towers allowed for pockets where the signal could not be received. The result, over time, was that levels of violence were 65% higher in areas where Rwandan national radio was received as opposed to areas where it wasn't. We've got a lot of hate and fear flying around our airwaves these days too, and it is destructive of our desire and need for community.

The answer is to live in one of those pockets defined by the two great commandments where Rwandan hate radio does not reach. One such pocket is our community here at St. Christopher's. So, think about marriage. Think about Paul. Think about this community as a vital instrument of God's salvation.

It's January, , it's Epiphany, the beginning of a new year, a time of renewal. It's time to renew our own marriage vows as a community and to remember just how much this church family means to us all. It's time to reach out to the people you know and love personally who need to be drawn back into the love that exists here. It's time to remember that God has married us all and that we need to weigh our responsibility in this communion at St. Christopher's the same as we would weigh our responsibility to our spouse or to our brothers and sisters, and our children.

Jesus' third Epiphany at Cana reveals what God intends for the church is to be. Bonds as strong as marriage should be our goal at St. Christopher's. Let's believe in and seek that level of commitment. Time to fall in love again.

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