

Epiphany 2
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

January 19, 2025
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Gifts of the Spirit

My eldest son has a hobby of auto mechanics. More specifically, he loves to build trucks that could crawl over my house if he wanted to. Huge tires, tube frames, multiple transmissions, he does it all. He's good at it, too. I call him all the time like this, "Leni, this is Dad and I have a car question." He's almost always right. He loves it.

I don't. I just get frustrated with it. I get most aggravated when I've labored to dismantle something and I'm putting it all back together. I've taken care to lay out all the pieces so you don't forget any—I learned that one the hard way, and just as I'm going to put in the last bolt it slips from my fingers and gets lodged in the center of the whole project, because without it, it just won't work. I have to take it all apart again just to retrieve the one essential piece.

But then, that's the thing, isn't it? There is no such thing as the one essential piece. Each piece is part of a whole puzzle; it plays a role; it gives a gift to the whole, and in the end, its gift is the gift of wholeness. Each piece has a gift, which when given in concert with all the other gifts, gives the gift of wholeness.

I think that would help us understand something of the Apostle Paul's vision of the Church in today's Epistle reading. The Spirit is the mastermind that designs and puts together the Body of Christ. Each believer has a gift to bring. (Much has been said about the contents of the three major lists of gifts in Paul's writings, but I don't think they are exhaustive or prescriptive even when combined into one list. Gifts are multiple and varied—as you will see.) The key phrase in Paul's passage is "for the common good." The gifts of the Spirit are given to the members of the Body of Christ for the common good. They aren't for one's own purposes, ends or goals. They give the gift of wholeness to the Body.

With this in mind, turn your eye toward the Gospel lesson for today. Jesus and his family get invited to a wedding feast, a whole week of feasting, music, dancing and rich ritual. Maybe they were extended family, we're not told, but when catastrophe strikes, Mary feels it is close enough to her concern to do something about it. She goes to Jesus.

Jesus, on the other hand, is at this particular moment, thinking bigger thoughts. His use of the word, "woman," is not as disrespectful as it might sound to us today. The Native American Version of the Bible renders it, "honorable woman," and I think that's closer to the intent. Mary, on the other hand, ignores his high-mindedness and does something practical.

She says to the servants, "Do whatever he says."

You know the story. Six big stone jars are filled with water. Water is drawn out and presented as wine (yes, there is a Eucharistic reference here,) and the chief steward befuddled and hugely relieved—while the party rolls on! And Jesus has performed his first great sign of power recorded in John and the disciples believe in him—which is the purpose of the whole book.

What are the gifts given in this story?

Mary gives a gift. She has been honored since very early in the life of the Church as intercessor for the saints before her Son. I really like Henri Nouwen's definition of intercession. It's not just praying, "God bless Aunt Hilda and her bunions," it is an act of profound love and empathy, where one seeks to take upon themselves as complete an understanding of the person being prayed for as possible, and then goes and just sits in the presence of God, holding this person there in your own very being as if you were them. In other words, intercessors build bridges between God and people. Mary did this when she gave birth to Jesus. Now she is doing it again. Mary gives the gift of intercession—bridges.

Jesus gives a gift. As I said before, to run out of wine was truly catastrophic. Food and wine needed to flow endlessly throughout the whole seven-day celebration. Mixing wine with water made the water safer to drink. It was an essential part of the party. To run out of wine was shameful, stingy, enormously embarrassing and dangerous. They would never live it down.

Jesus' quip about it not being his time yet sets an important aspect of the context. Jesus' "hour" in the book of John, always reaches beyond the moment. In this case it reaches forward to Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, which are Jesus' "hour," Jesus' defining work. Changing water into wine is not Jesus' "hour," but it anticipates it. Jesus does this to help his disciples understand just what he is all about.

Then he tells the servants to fill six big stone jars with water—a lot of water, maybe even enough to last to the end of the feast—then to draw some out and take it to the steward. What the steward gets is wine—good wine, the best wine of the party! He is relieved, I'm sure, but also profoundly surprised, for he doesn't know where it came from! Jesus has given the steward the gift of generosity and us the gift of understanding.

The servants give a gift. I wonder what was going through their heads when Jesus told them to draw water and take it to the steward. "This is nonsense!" "Are you crazy, he's not that drunk!" "Do you want to get us all fired!" If they thought these things they did not act on

them. What we get is simple humble obedience, even when it seems dangerously idiotic. The results of their obedience far outweigh the effort. The water is now wine, and though they know the secret, it is more important that they have played an important role in preserving the honor and reputation of the family. They have given the gift of honor.

Without each of these gifts the family would have been humiliated and people could have gotten sick, we would not have had the revelations of who Mary and Jesus are, and the servants would have probably been dismissed. Gifts given for the common good.

You have gifts, I have gifts. Gifts are being given constantly at St. Paul's, for which I am enormously grateful. At the Parish Meeting last week, we handed out a packet that included lists of people giving gifts, but gifts abound in unexpected ways. This year Resurrección invited members of St. Paul's to join them in celebrating Las Posadas.

We did the first one bilingually, and then decided that people from St. Paul's were welcome at any of them, and if they showed up, we would do the rite bilingually. That was a gift to St. Paul's. Bilingual liturgical events are work. If you're not bilingual, it's easy to feel left out of half of what is going on. We do them for what they symbolize, not because they are fun. On the second to last one, one person from St Paul's came. I began looking for someone who could lead the short liturgy in both languages, when this person spoke up and said, "Don't do it bilingually only on account of me." For a White person to choose to step aside was a gift was given to Resurrección that will not be forgotten.

What you contribute to the common good is your gift. It may benefit St. Paul's. It may benefit the Church at large. It may benefit the community of Skagit Valley, or it may benefit humanity and the earth—but it is your gift. It's not something you do to feel good because it's not about you. It's about the effect your action has in the community. It may be something you have a passion for, or are particularly good at doing, but it may be just something you just do, an extension of who you are. It's your place, your niche, your spot on the great tapestry of existence.\

What is your gift? Do not look within, for the information is not found there. Look at the community with the greatest empathy and insight you can muster. What does your action do in the community. Does it strengthen the fabric or tear it? Does it build it up, or does it tear it down? Does it build bridges or does it dig ditches? Does it intercede or does it deny? Is it a gift or is it a curse?

The Spirit only gives us gifts to give that share in God's healing and restoration of the world.