

SERMON

STARTERS

David Barnhart

January 14, 2007 **Second Sunday after** **Epiphany**

Isaiah 62:15; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Cor.
12:1-11; John 2:1-11

If we are going to be honest, many Christians find this whole wedding metaphor a little embarrassing. “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” We know that when the wedding metaphor crops up, we’re not talking about white dresses and tuxedos—we’re talking about revelry, a party celebrating intimate, unashamed love and desire, with plenty of wine to go around. God’s people play the part of the blushing bride, eagerly anticipating the honeymoon and the consummation of their marriage. What a metaphor for the kingdom of God!

Only at Cana, we have a crisis: we’re out of wine! We fear that the party is over, and it’s time for the guests to go home.

Perhaps it feels that way at your church too. Perhaps the pastor feels like an anxious party coordinator, worried that not everyone will have a good time. Perhaps the guests are looking around wondering why the laughter has died and the good times have ceased to roll. Sure, we know we’re living in the post-resurrection world when every morning should be Easter morning. (The “third day” in verse 1 reminds us of the other third day.)

But sometimes Easter seems long gone. We look around at the congregation and wonder where the Life of the party has gone.

Good news! The best is yet to come.

The party may have lulled, but there is plenty of excellent miraculous wine to go around. Even better, it is a fine vintage, provided by Jesus himself.

January 21, 2007 **Third Sunday** **after Epiphany**

Neh. 8:1-3,5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1
Cor. 12:12-31; Luke 4:21-30

Imagine the church as a giant floating eyeball, or a giant listening ear. The idea is humorous at best and monstrous at worst. Paul wants us to see that such a body is useless: the eye rolls in the dust, unseeing. The giant ear lies limp, unable to talk about what it hears.

Paul hints at some of the amusing implications for church life. Church members who are “less honorable” (and every pastor has some church members they describe as unflattering body parts) may need some extra respect or extra covering. Members who suffer may need attention—or they may make the whole church suffer! At the same time, the body delights in the joy of one member.

Paul lays down some heavy ecclesiology: Y’all, the Church, are the body of Christ. We are the physical broken-and-resurrected body, the flesh that incarnates God for the world, that carries around the miracle-working Spirit. Therefore, Paul chides the Corinthians, if you are going to strive for particular gifts, don’t strive for gifts that make you seem smart and important. Instead, strive for the gifts that build up the body.

I often hear pastors lament the sick state of the church. We pastors may be

tempted to take this passage as authority to diagnose and treat the body’s problems—perhaps perform an amputation if the gangrene is severe.

But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us in *Life Together*, God did not give us the body of Christ so that we could constantly take its temperature. The body of Christ is broken, wounded, and scarred, and it is precisely because of the wounds it bears that we have new life.

January 28, 2007 **Fourth Sunday** **after Epiphany**

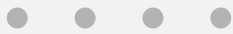
Jer.1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Cor. 13:1-
13; Luke 4:21-30

Jesus drops from favorite son status in his hometown when he insults his old neighbors. Their proud words and admiration in verse 22 change to shouts of outrage and wounded pride six verses later.

What is Jesus playing at? Talk about self-fulfilling prophecies! He says they are too stubborn to listen so, naturally, they don’t. Jesus sounds like a rookie preacher straight out of seminary. Surely some of us more experienced preachers would be able to lecture Jesus about what he did wrong here: he should have been more sensitive. He should have preached with them instead of at them.

Jesus’ words will make people angry throughout his ministry. They still make people angry! I suspect that one of the reasons he chooses fishermen for his disciples is because after this incident, it becomes clear that he needs bodyguards with some muscle.

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How easy it is for churches to become self-congratulatory, to identify God's promises and purposes with our own culture and our own group. How would we hear Jesus' rhetoric today? "There were many with cancer in America, yet he chose to heal a man in Bolivia. There were many who needed a miracle in Protestant churches, yet God chose to go to a mosque." Would we give Jesus a fair hearing? Or would we growl about one of "ours" turning on us?

If we've been believers for a long time, we begin to feel we know Jesus. We begin to think we know what he would do or say. Surprise! Jesus isn't ours. We can choose to be his, or we can crucify him. He does not leave us any other choice.

February 4, 2007

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 6:1-13; Psalm 138; 1 Cor. 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

Many of us in the church feel like Peter. We hear Jesus' command to let down the nets one more time, and we can't help but feel that this lake is overfished. We've tried evangelism of one sort or another again and again, but we don't see any results. A friend recently told me, "If I see yet another heavily-hyped book about church growth or evangelism in our culture, I may scream!" Yet the command of Jesus comes: let down the nets. My own efforts at spreading the Good News often have no more energy than Peter's heavy sigh: okay, fine. If you say so.

How quickly things change when Jesus gets on the boat! Now the nets cannot contain all the fish. The fishermen call over other boats to handle the overflow. Can you imagine such a thing happening in your church? Could the Spirit of God transform so many people that our churches couldn't handle all of them, and we'd have to (gasp!) cooperate with other churches to bring them home? One thing is clear: all our prejudices about what does and doesn't work don't matter when we're in the same boat with Jesus.

When Peter sees it, he immediately knows Jesus as God the Son. He imitates Isaiah's words: "I am lost, for I am a man

of unclean lips!" Anyone who has truly felt God's call struggles with his or her own worthiness. More than once I have stepped into the pulpit regretting words I've said during the week. Any Christian who opens their mouth to witness to friends feels the same burden. Yet Jesus has a promise for Peter and us: from now on, you will catch people—and as long as you are on the boat with me, you will see miraculous catches.

February 11, 2007

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Cor.
15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

The Psalm sounds like classic wisdom literature: the good will prosper, the wicked will wither. It doesn't take much life experience for us to respond with words like Job or the author of Ecclesiastes: oh yeah?

Evil looms over us. Wickedness seems so substantial and real. When we turn on the evening news, death and destruction slap us in the face and distort how we see the world. In the face of depressing reality, the Psalmist declares that the wicked are like chaff that the wind drives away. Like Alice in Wonderland speaking the truth to the Queen of Hearts, the author says to all the self-assured wicked tyrants: you're nothing but a pack of cards! You're just a bit of nothing—detritus removed by the breath of God that leaves all the good stuff behind. Would these words give hope to people in your congregation? Those forces that seem so powerful—abusive spouses, drug pushers, predatory lenders, military dictators—will simply blow away.

Jeremiah knows that the true test of those who put their trust in God comes in times of trial. Those who rely on their own strength have no spiritual resources to survive a time of drought. But those who have sent out their roots into God's living water continue to bear fruit, even when the soil around them turns cracked and arid. Likewise the Psalmist looks forward to the time of judgment, when those who scoff and walk the path of wickedness will simply vanish, like chaff blown away by the wind.

February 18, 2007

**Seventh Sunday
after Epiphany**

Ex. 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Cor. 3:12—
4:2; Luke 9

This text has so many layers, so many overlapping symbols, and so many intertextual references, it may be easy to get lost. It will be difficult to decide what not to preach about this passage. Do you play up the parallels with Moses on the mountain? With Elijah's fiery departure? Do you note the parallels between this event and Gethsemane? Do you focus on Peter's baffled response?

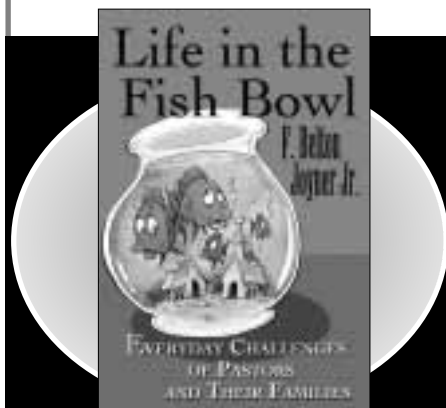
We love the glorified Jesus. One contemporary praise chorus refers to Jesus "high and lifted up, shining in the light of [his] glory." Countless traditional hymns extol God's glory. Yet if you ask either church or unchurched people what "glory" is, you will likely get a blank stare. How do we recognize glory? Do we see it in the Jesus of a thousand stained glass windows and haloed paintings? Do we see glory in the Jesus who suffered hangnails and blisters? Can we see glory as easily in the cross as we can in the special effects on the mountain?

This passage embodies all the difficulties preachers face every Sunday. We want to help our congregations catch a vision of the Kingdom, to see the Big Picture. We try to do justice to the whole Bible—the Law (Moses), the Prophets (Elijah), and the Gospel (Jesus). We preach a Jesus both human and divine, glorified and humble, clear and baffling. It's an impossible task! Yet all our words strive to say the same thing God does in this passage. This Jesus is God's son! Listen to him! □



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and Family
Responsibilities**



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