

Wedding gifts: John 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

In the Lectionary

January 9, 2007

What do you get for the bride who has everything? It's unusual these days for a couple not to have all they need before they marry. They don't need dishes or kitchenware—unless they hope to upgrade. Their grandparents may have started out in a small apartment with a used stove and an icebox, but the 21st-century couple already owns a Viking stove and Sub-Zero refrigerator.

The least imaginative way of shopping is by a computerized gift registry. If that is filled, we may start turning (with more imagination than sense) to things that nobody needs—like ashtrays from Bali and clocks from NASA. Earlier this year, the online magazine *Slate* ran a contest for Unidentifiable Wedding Gifts. Sure enough, under the headline “Oh. My. God,” they described gifts that were truly bizarre. An asymmetrical dish crouched on three vaguely animal legs; an item that might have come from a Haight-Ashbury head shop turned out to be a gourd for brewing yerba maté.

No one knows what gift Jesus might have brought to the wedding at Cana, but it could hardly have been more frivolous than the favor his mother asked of him. The wine had run out. “Woman, what is that to us?” Jesus replied. “My time has not yet come.” Surely the Son of Man had not come to get the guests liquored up.

But he relented and quietly, miraculously, saved the host from embarrassment. John's account of the wedding has all kinds of eucharistic significance. There is also a homelier dimension to this story, which is that the miracle served as Jesus' wedding gift.

It was the gift of joy, a good time for all. Thanks to Jesus, instead of the host and guests pointing fingers at each other, everyone had a great time. We can imagine the dancing, laughter, camaraderie and delight of the day, as people who had not been together for many years renewed their ties. Guests who otherwise might have had nothing in common had come together because of the host. In many ways, then, the wedding feast resembled the kingdom of God.

Jesus brought a wonderful gift. It didn't really need to last beyond the wedding, since the best gifts contribute to the day, to the memories of joy, instead of gathering dust in a cabinet or attic. They may not, and likely will not, be material things.

Spiritual gifts come in other ways; they can't be handed to someone, but rather are discovered in them. They come from God in moments of personal creation, such as birth or conversion. Perhaps a wedding can be such a life-changing moment, as the flesh of two becomes one. But I think it's likelier that marriage reveals more than it changes—that it shows, as never before, who we really are.

Marriage reveals spiritual gifts. Patience, humor, thrift, attentiveness and forgiveness count for a lot. Paul describes other gifts in the 12th chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians. He names spiritual gifts (wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, interpretation of tongues) that we associate more with church. But they are just as important in a marriage. Think what they can do for couples as they put together a budget, name the children, struggle with alcohol, help someone through depression, look after aged parents, and face the eventual parting that comes to all couples. These are not particularly rare gifts, either.

A man sitting down at the kitchen table with his wife of 20 years thinks how to tell her that the spark has gone. He loves her and doesn't want her to feel undesirable or fearful; unfortunately, he doesn't have the right words. And while her imagination can run away with her (she fears he's had an affair), she also has a knack for reading between the lines, discerning what he can't quite say.

"You're saying that you're not interested because you've finally figured out that you're patchy on the back of your head?" she asks. "It does sound something like that," he admits. "I think the problem is inside your head," she says. It's not easy to discuss these things, yet 20 years together have taught them how to redeem this marriage. The Spirit helps them to bring out the best in each other.

Paul asserts that no one should be expected to have all the gifts. Rather, it's when we come together that we are fully blessed. Wherever two or more are gathered, as someone said.

What is remarkable is Paul's suggestion that these varied gifts, some of them so ordinary, build the kingdom of God, one household at a time. We are accustomed to finding that we are human, broken, dysfunctional. Apparently there is a much more positive dimension to who we are—because through Jesus we have married into

God's family.

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus revealed his own gifts as a bridegroom. He set aside his own priorities and didn't distinguish between someone else's wants and needs. Out of water came wine; out of duty came joy. A wedding day is supposed to leave a surplus, and maybe that's what the six tall jars of wine signified: enough joy to last till the kingdom of God.

The next chapter in 1 Corinthians is, of course, the fabled "love chapter." (Yes, my wife and I have it in needlepoint—a gift.) The gift of love is very common indeed, and not at all imaginative or clever. It's also labor-intensive; two or more persons are required for it to work. Without love, however, we have nothing even if we seem to have everything.