

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

My entire message is focused on one phrase, “for the common good.” Maybe you heard it, or maybe you were looking out the window for snow or thinking about the Eagles’ game when Lynn read it. It was halfway through our reading from 1st Corinthians as Paul gives the manifestation of the Spirit a purpose. I think it’s really important for us to pay attention to Paul’s message.

We’re going to spend a fair amount of time in 1st Corinthians over the next few weeks...at least that’s my current plan. I don’t often try to set up a “sermon series” because far too often I get distracted or bored with what I hoped to do over a few weeks, and I find myself struggling to stay on target. But for now, I’m thinking about what Paul says to this community of early Christians and what it says to us in our time and place as we learn more about one another and move into the next chapter of St. Paul’s story.

That’s not to say there isn’t a lot to think about in our gospel reading – and I do want to say something about the wedding at Cana as a way of setting up what Paul then says to the early Christians.

This miracle at Cana always feels a bit odd to me. Why did John, the teller of this Gospel of signs and discourses, focus on **this** as the first public revelation of Jesus as the Messiah? It certainly doesn’t carry the weight of the raising of Lazarus (his last sign before being arrested). It doesn’t seem that important in the grand scheme of things that the wedding guests had enough wine to become sufficiently inebriated in celebration.

And there’s so much we don’t know about this story...we have no clue who the bride and groom are, why Jesus and the disciples were invited, or why it fell to Jesus’ mother to find a solution. To understand why this story matters we have to pull in everything we know about the culture of this 1st century community.

This marriage was a big deal because every marriage was a big deal. It wasn’t two young lovers saying, “I do” after a charming story like a good romcom. It was a ritual to strengthen the community and build new connections between families – a social contract that would have had implications for status and wealth. The celebration would have been about a new alliance and the forging of a legacy to continue communal wealth. And if the groom’s family didn’t have enough wine...well, that just wouldn’t have been a good start.

So, what JC did in this miracle was not about lubricating the frivolity of a party but about saving an entire family’s honor. This miracle is a glimpse of God’s abundance in the midst of potential disaster – God in Christ was acting to fend off scarcity for the sake of the **common good**.

In very different circumstances and with no miraculous wine creation, Paul makes a similar point to the church in Corinth. He’s writing this letter to that particular community in that

particular time and place to help them recognize that they are **God's church**. They are God's people at work in the midst of their larger community. They're not a club of friends who come together to celebrate their own abundance. They are a called people who have been given the gifts of the Holy Spirit so that they can have an impact on the world around them. They are given the power and purpose of God's good news to be shared for the sake of the common good. For all – for their friends and neighbors and enemies and oppressors.

Paul draws a distinct line from the waters of baptism to the gifts of the Spirit to the community's collective work in the world. We would do well to look for that same line. We celebrated the baptism of Jesus last Sunday, at which we remembered that we were claimed in the water to be God's children – to be part of a universal family, but then we also live out that calling, that claim, that gift in our particular time and place.

We welcomed Ridge and Ryder into that family today as they were claimed in the waters of our font to “join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world.”

That's what we said. And I hope we meant it. Because the waters we remembered last week were only the beginning. The waters that washed Ridge and Ryder this week are only the beginning. Our promises to God and to them are not a weekly exercise in saying the right words at the right time and then forgetting them when we walk out that door. We are here, we have been claimed, we have been gifted for the common good.

And I think we all know how desperately the world needs some good. No matter where you stand on the politics of today, no matter who you vote for, I'm pretty sure we can all agree that the world needs more good in it right now.

Tomorrow, we pause to remember a prophet and martyr, Martin Luther King, Jr. who was assassinated almost 57 years ago. Assassinated...because the world wasn't able to hear the good he preached. 75% of the people of this country didn't approve of him or his message when he was killed. We look back now and realize how much good there was in his words of prophecy, but his vision of the common good was soundly rejected.

After several generations, are we doing anything to bring them to fruition? Are we doing enough for the common good to be worthy of his example – to be worthy of the gospel, to borrow Paul's words from a different letter?

That's a heavy lift – I always think that when I hear that phrase, “be worthy of the gospel.” And I think you can hear the heavy lift in this passage of 1st Corinthians: the gifts of the Spirit are not for us alone. The salvation that comes in the waters of baptism isn't just to make us individually right with God. We are given that gift of salvation, we are given the manifestation of the Spirit so that we can do something good for the world in which we live. Not to earn our way to heaven – the water and the cross have taken care of that. We don't have to worry about that.

But the world needs us. The community of Newark needs the people of God at St. Paul's. Our purpose here is to be God's people in this particular time and place, to do the work of the gospel for the common good. I came here in part because I saw it happening in the work you are doing together. I can't wait to see how much more we can do with what God has given us. Amen.