

Look at all these wedding gifts

Dear bride of Christ,

What do you remember about your wedding? Or, if you aren't married, what do you dream of? There are so many details that go into that day – sometimes plenty of stress, maybe even some disagreements. *Where do we have it? Who do we invite? Who will be in the wedding party? What's on the menu? Who sits where?* Some people truly enjoy all of those details, but others just want to get it done.

They say that how you plan a wedding says a lot about what that marriage is going to be like. Are there clashes and compromises? Is one side doing all the work, or is there a happy division of labor? Do the parents take over or let the couple figure it out on their own? For as beautiful as the wedding day always looks, sometimes there are some real headaches going into it. But going out of it – what was it all for? What lasts? Two things, right: the vows and the gifts. And really, both of those could be classified as gifts – the vows are just gifts the bride and groom give each other.

So let's look at our text today on this New Member Welcome Sunday, this Second Sunday in Epiphany – and let's **Look at all these Wedding Gifts**. I know, a first reading of this text might make you wonder why I'm talking about weddings, but consider what we're really seeing here in the context of all of our readings for this Sunday.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus was celebrating a wedding and showing us who he is. In our Psalm, we sang how happy we are to be the Lord's. In the Old Testament Lesson, God describes us as his beloved, his bride – and says he rejoices over us like a bridegroom rejoices over his bride. The picture of a wedding is certainly in the air today. Now look at our sermon text, and it might seem like we've lost the picture of a wedding. But think about it. What is this text about? It's about gifts. It's about gifts God gives to his bride, his Church. Here we are looking at this huge pile of wedding gifts.

We start with the gift of this relationship. I say “wedding gifts” and our minds probably jump to the toasters and blenders and china and salt shakers and all the like. But, those gifts only come because other gifts are given first – love and respect, submission and commitment. The fruits of that relationship are the real wedding gifts.

And we certainly see those in our wedding to Christ. We are the bride. In the text, Paul sets out to talk about spiritual gifts, but

before he gets into all the things they had been asking about like speaking in tongues and interpreting tongues and prophecy and discernment – he reminds them of the greatest spiritual gift they all have – regardless of what other variety of gifts might be there. He says: **“No one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.”**

We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit living in us, the gift of faith. That’s what put us in this relationship, in this wedding. The next verse emphasizes that, pointing to the fact that God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is the one who gives us all of those other gifts, those benefits of this marriage. In fact, spiritual gifts, verse 7 tells us, are just **“manifestations of the Spirit”** – they are just the Spirit in us showing itself, demonstrating that you truly are the bride of Christ.

So think about that – we are the bride. If you’ve been a groom, I pray you know the feeling. If you haven’t, I can’t hope to begin to describe it: standing there in the front of church, watching that woman walk toward you, beautiful as can be, ready to give her life to you just as you are ready to give yours to her. It’s an amazing feeling. That’s the feeling God has as he looks at us. Isaiah told us in our Old Testament Lesson: **“As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.”** If you’ve been standing there, feeling that, you know there is nothing you wouldn’t give for your bride.

And our bridegroom demonstrated that. He gave his all, always – and still he does – dressing us up in his righteousness, stating our case before the Father of how beautiful we truly are because of His work. And on the other side, when we know what it is our bridegroom did for us, we want to give our lives to him. It makes it easy to say “I do.” That’s what Paul is talking about with this whole ‘saying “Jesus is Lord”’ thing.

Think about that, this past year, 23 adults made their confirmation vows and 6 others repeated theirs, transferring in to our congregation. Why? Is it because they are so good, so committed, so strong? Well, they are those things – but those only come because they’ve been given the gift of faith. They’ve seen God’s love for them and can’t help but want to express their love in return. They spontaneously do what Paul wrote in Romans 10: **“confess with their mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’ and believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead.”** That’s what happens when we see our bridegroom for who he is.

All of you members have made those same promises, whether you joined 20 years ago or 20 days ago – you vowed to (let me read exactly what you committed to) “continue steadfast in this teaching and endure all things, even death, rather than fall away from it,” to “conform all your life to the teachings of God’s Word; to be faithful in the use of the Word and Sacrament; attending worship and Bible Study regularly, studying His Word at home, and in faith and action remain true to God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as long as you live.”

Those are the wedding gifts we give to our bridegroom because he deserves them, because he has earned them, and because he has given us the faith to make them. But, you know our groom. He can never be outgiven. Look at our text.

I started today talking about all of the many details and steps that go into the planning of a wedding. I challenge you to find one more fun than the gift registry gun. Do you know what I’m talking about? That is that little laser gun thingie that looks like what the cash register attendants have at the store – and you go around and zap whatever it is you want to put on the gift registry – so people know what kind of gifts are needed, so that you don’t get 4 of the same thing and you get what can really be useful. That day was a blast. I remember zapping everything from towels to a package of Twinkies (which we got, by the way); from luggage to just the right mixer. You got to go around and imagine the perfect set-up for your new home, your new marriage, and you zapped it and then it appeared.

Think of that as a picture of the gifts that this marriage we’re talking about today has been given. Our text says: **⁷Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit** (those are the gifts) **is given for the common good. ⁸To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.**

Just like the couple registers for which gifts they think will make their home complete, God gives just the right gifts to his church. So, as he has inspired you to respond to his overwhelming love by making those commitments to use your gifts for the “common good”, he gives you the gifts that will work for the best functioning of this

church. Think of God going throughout the whole world and finding and giving the perfect gifts to make his dream bride.

He did that – in you. And so, here among us – there are those with the gift of knowledge, who can pass that on as Sunday School Teachers or Bible study leaders; there are those of you given wisdom, who can apply God’s truths in how you lead and interact; there are those who always seem to have the right word of God on their lips, and those that have a good eye for discerning what is best in a given situation. Now, some of the gifts listed here may have been needed by the bride for another time, and some are more important now. Some, we may not even be sure fully what he’s talking about – but we know he has given to His Church exactly what she needs.

That’s why we have reason to celebrate this wedding of all of our new members to Christ and to our church. I know, there are times we are an ugly bride, hoarding our gifts or getting jealous over gifts that I individually didn’t get. There are times some of us can become territorial about our gifts or, at the opposite end of the spectrum – we can selfishly NOT use our gifts for the good of this marriage with Christ – and use them only for ourselves. We’ve been an ugly bride plenty of times.

So praise God for our perfect bridegroom. You know, there is a debate out there about whether there is just one “soul-mate” for each person in the world or if it’s just a matter of being willing to give your heart and soul to another. In this relationship between Christ and his church – there was ONLY One bridegroom that could handle us – because only the perfect Son of God could live true righteousness that he gives as our wedding gift – and only the sinless Son of Man could take our ugliness, our pride, our sin on himself and lay down his life for his bride. That is exactly what Jesus did. That is who He is – the bridegroom, now watching us, his bride, dressed in perfection and gleaming with righteous beauty walk down the aisle as we live as the bride of Christ.

Look at all these wedding gifts! In God’s Word, you’ve heard his vow. In our confession, you’ll make yours. Then stick around after the service for the banquet and a chance to hear how your gifts can be used for this marriage. It’s your wedding day, and today, you are God’s gifts to His Church!

In Christ,
Amen.