

Text: Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Title: Spiritual Gifts and Wedding Rings

Date: January 17, 2010

Well, Valentines is just shy of a month away, so I can get away with talking about marriage and love without being accused of being a walking talking Hallmark card. That and I am not real big Valentine's Day guy. Don't get me wrong; I like hearts and flowers as much as the next guy- but the whole romance as command performance thing just rubs me the wrong way. But I like being married- so I'll do something the day before or the day after and not feel that I am being coerced. Besides- I've got to build up positive husband points to cancel out those inevitable times when I am going to do or say something that will put me into negative husband points. You know what I mean.... It's funny, given that we live in such a sexualized culture, that we rarely talk about the reasons we like being married. That, and the average guy doesn't talk about stuff like that- which is why Hallmark invented Valentines' Day to begin with- to get us off the hook.

But there is more to the notion of marriage than romance. We are so used to wedding imagery to describe the New Covenant (bride of Christ, etc) that we no longer are struck by how revolutionary that phrase is. Ancient Israel understood their Covenant with God much the same way modern Islam understands Sharia law: as a peace treaty between God and man, one in which God sets the terms and we live up to them- or else. But marriage language- that implies a mutual revelation and support that was completely blows the treaty idea out of the water. God essentially tells his people, I will establish a relationship with you based on My love and not your obedience. No wonder they call it the New Covenant!

This is what Isaiah is coming from. By this time, after decades of being stuck in Babylon during the Exile- the Jews had real handles on what happens when God decides to enforce the "if you do this, I will do that" provisions of the Covenant. Peace treaty – break it and you have war- a war that you will lose. But now Isaiah arrives with a different message, one of redemption and restoration. Which is where we catch up to him. He is in the middle of a longer passage promises God' redemption, the one that starts with, "*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me*

he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners....” If that sounds familiar, it is because that is the passage Jesus used when he preached in his home town of Nazareth. Not a bad place to begin.

Anyway, Isaiah promises that he will not stop proclaiming this promise of restoration that he has been talking about for a chapter or so until it comes to pass. There is more at stake here than merely going home. God has more for them than a second time at back when it comes to living up to the covenant. God is going to us restore them in such a way that it will be obvious that God is at work to everyone, even the pagan gentiles. Their salvation is going to be like a flaming torch in the darkness, arresting attention and illumination everything around it.

You are going to be given a new name. Those who heard Isaiah knew very well that a new name signified a new relationship with God. Jacob became IS-RA-EL (the man who has seen God) and Abram became AV- RA- AM (father of a great people). Names in the Ancient world revealed ones’ true nature to all around them. Isaiah wasn’t the first prophet to use names. God told Hosea to name his kids “Not pitied” and “Not My people” as a what to shake his audience up. Yet in chapter 2 of Hosea we have God promising to change their names to “Pitied” and “My People.”

In pretty much the same way Isaiah tells his people that no longer will they be called Forsaken and Desolate. You can see why they might have thought of themselves this way. this last week we have seen pictures of complete and utter devastation in Haiti. Building crumpled, rubble strewn everywhere, with people trapped in the wreckage. Now add fire to the mix and the knowledge that this was not brought about by an act of God, but by an army that you thought God was going to protect you from. No wonder they felt Forsaken! But now they will be known as My Delight Is In Her and their land Married. This is not a prophecy for individual restoration and redemption. This is a promise that God is going to create a New People- and even their land will be blessed. Finally, their relationship with God will be best described as God rejoicing over them. Sounds like a never ending honeymoon, doesn’t it?

Earlier I said that I like being married and part of the deal is that I get to wear a wedding ring. Lynne and I got married in December and a lot of her extended family

was not able to come because the airports were shut down for bad weather that year. So that summer we drove up to Washington so that I could meet them. When we were at her uncle's I noticed that she didn't have her wedding ring on. So I suggested that she show everyone her ring! From the very beginning I have been working on negative husband points.... So what is the big deal about wedding rings anyway? It's not like I need to be reminded that I am married when I wake up in the morning. It's not like I am Brad Pitt, waving it to ward off supermodels. And it's not like if I take it off to work on the car than I am not married. On its face it's a ring, nothing more or less. Yet on another level, it is an outward sign and seal of a covenant relationship with Lynne. It's a symbol that come hell or high water we are on each other's side; a promise that we choose to build a life together- a life that is marked by love and celebration. This ring does not guarantee these things- it is just the outward reminder that the promise of these things is already mine.

What are the outward signs of the promise that God made to Isaiah? For these were not sometime way off History Channel end of the world prophecies- everything that God promises Isaiah has already come to pass in the person of Jesus Christ (another reason that when Jesus finished reading Isaiah in Nazareth, he told them that this has been fulfilled in their hearing- no wonder they wanted to stone him.)

So let's review the promises that Isaiah made: **1)** God will make us a new people- with a new identity that reveals the covenant based not on Law but on God's Love. **2)** Our Salvation and Status is going to be obvious to the whole world, we will be like a torch in the darkness. **3)** We will "be a crown of Beauty in God's hand" a people who reflect God's glory and promise. What would an outward sign and symbol of God's covenant with us look like? If we are the Bride of Christ, what does our wedding ring look like? It would have to be something that build us up as a people, not just individuals. It would have to be something that channeled Gods glory and power through us. It would have to be something that would demonstrate God's love.

Let's take another look at spiritual gifts that Paul lists in 1 Corinthians. We are told that each one of us is gifted by the Holy Spirit to build up the church for the common good. We've got gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues.

Once more, Paul reminds us that they are all activated by the Holy Spirit. Normally, when we talk about the gifts of the spirit, there is an unstated assumption that we should be doing more with them. And while I have preached my share of sermons along those lines, the danger there is that we see spiritual gifts as something WE do and not as something GOD gives, like my wedding rings, these serve as an outward sign that I am in a covenant relationship with the God Most High- and that I am loved.

But probably more important than serving as a reminder of our covenant relationship with God- spiritual gifts are also down payments on God's promises to use us to make this world a better place. For the new Covenant is a learn by doing proposition. The more we exercise God's gifts, the closer we become to God. that is why it is so important to balance between giving and getting; not only be involved in ministry, but to be ministered to oneself. As we begin this year of our Lord 2010 let us see each other as God sees us, as ones beloved, full of potential- and let us be torches in the darkness to those who need to experience the Good News, and to live up to the Name that we have been given.

Let us pray.....