

Brancepeth Sermon: God's delight is in you

Third Sunday of Epiphany

Mike Higton

Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

Please be seated.

That passage from Isaiah gives us, I think,
one of the most beautiful images of salvation in the Bible.

God rejoices in you, God delights in you,

God glories in you –

God, your creator, who has known you

from before your first breath,

from before the first beat of your heart –

God your creator goes down on one knee

and asks you for your hand;

God *marries* you.

God joins God's life to you;
God gives you God's own name,
so that everyone will know whose spouse you are.

God wears God's love for you like a crown;
God carries it around like a torch.
God is devoted, God is captivated,
God is enraptured with love for you.

Now, everything God does,
God does with everything God is.
God holds nothing back, does nothing half-heartedly.
You don't get a sliver of God's attention,
whatever God has to spare beside
God's concentration on more important matters;
God doesn't divide up like that.
God is *wholly* for you.

For as a young man marries a young woman
So shall your builder marry you,
And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride
So shall your God rejoice over you.

Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens,
And your faithfulness to the clouds.
Our mortal flesh takes refuge
under the shadow of your wings.

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This picture of God marrying God's people
is a rich and beautiful one.

It is a powerful metaphor that communicates God's love,
but it is only a metaphor, and it does have limits –
and I want to think about one of those limits this morning.

The marriage between God and God's people
is not exactly an equal marriage.

If we take it as a picture of what
our relationships with *each other* should be like,
it gets disturbing pretty quickly.

After all, what would it be like to live with a spouse who
was always right?

What would it be like to live with a spouse who
knew absolutely everything?

(You can ask Hester after the service:
she'll tell you it definitely has its down side.

And in God's case, it would be even worse:

God really *does* know everything,
really *is* always right.)

In a relationship like that,
you would never win an argument.

You would never get your own way.

And, worse than that,
you would never be on your own;
you would never have your own space,
not even inside your own head

So it doesn't do to take this image too literally.

It doesn't do to push too far the comparison

of God's love for us

with the kind of love that we can have for one another.

If we have a relationship that unequal, that dependent,

with another human being

something has gone seriously wrong.

However loving, however caring, however devoted

he or she might be,

we would end up feeling smothered.

We would end up feeling that

we weren't really free to be ourselves,

because we were always having to live up

to their image of us,

or to live up to their need for us to be a certain way.

We wouldn't be able to help feeling that

we were always having to live out the story

that *they* were telling about us —

a story that, however caring it sounded,
remained fundamentally *their* story.

I think we'd end up feeling that we were not free
simply to be ourselves,
that we were imprisoned, not freed, by their love.

Human love needs to be reciprocal,
there needs to be a balance of give and take;
it needs to be equal.

We need to adjust to each other,
to learn to respond to each other,
to discover who we are, and who we can be, together –
in ways that draw on what we each bring
to the equation,
and that change both of us in the process.

But God's love is not like human love,
because God is not like us.

God is not another person jostling us for space and attention.

God doesn't need us to be something other than ourselves
in order to meet God's needs –
because although God loves us
with everything God is,
God doesn't require us to fill some psychological need –
God *has* no psychological needs;
God doesn't feed off us in order to grow –
God doesn't *need* to grow.

God doesn't need to fit us into a story that was
written without us in mind.

God doesn't need us to be
something other than we really are,
because God is our maker:

God is our builder, to use Isaiah's word.

God knows who we truly are, all the way down,
every quirk, every awkward, angular part of us,
and God desires *our* growth, *our* flourishing, *our* life
as the people we really are.

God has no fantasies about us, no delusions,
no unrealistic expectations;

God's love is utterly open-eyed.

God sees us, through and through.

Being dependent upon God is not like being
dependent upon another human being.

It is not something that comes at the expense
of our own individuality, our own freedom,
our own proper independence.

Being dependent upon God is more like being dependent
upon the air that we breathe.

We don't think we can become more truly ourselves
by breathing less;

we don't normally feel imprisoned by the air around us.

The more easily, the more deeply, the more unrestrictedly
we are able to breathe

the freer, the less constricted we become; the more we grow.

God's love for us is like that –
it is like the air we breathe.

And it is that love that is behind the picture of the
work of the Holy Spirit, that Paul paints in 1 Corinthians.

The Spirit works in us
to draw us deeper into relation to God,
but that does not make us uniform.

It does not fit us into some identikit picture
of an ideal Christian;
a clone of the standard disciple.

The Spirit is not working on each of us
to make us something that we are not,
but rather to free each of us to be who we most deeply are.

That's why the Spirit's work makes us *different*.

Now there are varieties of gifts, says Paul,
but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services,
but the same Lord;

and there are varieties of activities,
but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

The Spirit unwraps the gift that each of us is.

That is, the Spirit makes us *more* ourselves –
and makes what we are a gift, a present,
to the people around us.

God's love works in us to allow us to be more truly ourselves,
more truly what we were created to be,
what we are able to be,
freed from the constrictions and distortions that tie us down.

And the picture Paul paints of the community
being formed by the Spirit is, in its way,
as beautiful as Isaiah's image, even if less high flown.

It is of a community in which each person brings
their own contribution, the gift distinctive to them,
grounded in who they are,
in their history, in their talents,
in all that they have been and are –

a contribution drawn out of them by the Spirit,
made more than it could otherwise be by the Spirit,
empowered and liberated by the Spirit.

And the Spirit works to weave all of those gifts into
a single community –

teaches us to be givers, to be gifts,
and to be recipients of each other's gifts.

And only with each one of us becoming what we are,
giving what we are,
does the community become a body
the body of Christ
the communication of God's glory.

God loves each one of you.

God sees you, and glories in you,
and what God sees in you is particular to you.

God sees the gift that you are,
the gift that you can be.

God sees what it would be for you
to grow more fully into that gift.
Whoever you are,
whatever you have done,
and whatever has been done to you;
however little you think you have to give,
however little you think you matter:
God rejoices in you, God delights in you;
God joins God's life to you.
God gives you God's own name;
God wears God's love for you like a crown
and carries it around like a torch.
God is devoted, God is captivated,
God is enraptured with love for you.
For as a young man marries a young woman
So shall your builder marry you,
And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride
So shall your God rejoice over you.
Amen.