

Sermon for January 17, 2010

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Year C: Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Here's a joke. There is precedent for beginning a sermon this way. Father Bill started his sermons with a joke and Marguerite has told us a joke a time or two, so I think I'm in good company.

During the wedding rehearsal, the groom approached the priest with an unusual offer. "Look, I'll give you \$100 if you'll change the wedding vows. When you get to the part where I'm to promise to 'love, honor, and obey' and 'forsaking all others, be faithful to her forever,' I'd appreciate it if you'd just leave that part out." He slipped the priest the cash and walked away. The wedding day arrived. When it came time for the groom's vows, the priest looked the young man in the eye and said, "Will you promise to prostrate yourself before her, obey her every command and wish, serve her breakfast in bed every morning of your life and swear eternally before God and your lovely wife that you will not ever even look at another woman, as long as you both shall live?"

The groom gulped and looked around and then said in a tiny voice, "I do."

After the ceremony, the groom pulled the priest aside and hissed, "I thought we had a deal."

The priest gave him back his \$100 and said, "We did, but the bride's father made me a much better deal."

The gospel today, the wedding in Cana, I believe, is about faith – the faith of Mary, who had no doubt that her son could turn water into wine. It is about the faith of the young man Jesus who, once he realized there was no arguing with his mother, performed his first miracle. The gospel today is also about calling us to faith in a Risen Christ and faith in ourselves.

Here is another story about faith, maybe true and maybe not. A woman who was a missionary worked among impoverished, young children in the Middle East was driving her jeep down the road when she ran out of gas. She had no gas cans in her car. In fact the only thing she could find that could hold any amount of liquid was a training potty that she used while working with toddlers. The woman grabbed the training potty and walked a mile down the road until she reached a small town where she found a gas station. The station had no gas cans for sale so the missionary filled her training potty with gas and returned to her jeep. As she was pouring the gas into her vehicle, a large Cadillac occupied by wealthy oil sheiks pulled up next to her. They were fascinated at seeing this woman pour the contents of her training potty into the Jeep. The window of the Cadillac began to roll down. One of the sheiks leaned out of the window and said, "My friends and I, although we do not share your religion, we greatly admire your faith!"

The wedding at Cana in Galilee is about faith, as we have said. And it is also about grace. Grace is God's free gift. Grace comes to us at the pleasure of God. We don't have to earn it. We can't do away with it. We can't change it. We can just accept it. Or not.

Jesus didn't just turn water into wine. He created huge jars of Dom Perignon, a miracle of abundance, extravagance, transformation and new possibilities. This miracle of grace and faith anticipates his ultimate moment of grace to us three years later with his death, resurrection, and ascension. It is on this that our faith is rooted. Jesus' first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee is a sign that through Jesus, God came among us in a new way. The miracle of turning water into wine is a promise that through Christ, God is pouring out on us grace upon grace in unimaginable abundance so that we may also be turned from water into wine.

God has visited me with grace many times in my life, never more so than with my children. Although there were a myriad of events that kept us ...energized, we were graced by the lack of anything major. Since two of my sons are in the congregation, I will refrain from telling you specifically about them. But trust me, there are stories! Here is one that Thomas and Collyn probably won't mind my telling:

When they were teenagers, they were all acolytes at Eastern Shore Chapel, and they faithfully showed up, vested up and carried **in** the cross, but they weren't always there to carry it **out**. They might be outside playing basketball during the service, in their red and white acolyte vestments. Or they might have taken the keys to my car and driven around the cemetery and they might have gotten stuck in a mud bank and half the congregation might have had to march down to the cemetery to dig out my car. That could have happened. Grace for me, in some ways, was when we all lived through those years. It has been said that knowing your children as adults is the reward you get for not killing them as teenagers.

Here is a story about CS Lewis. During a British conference on comparative religions, there was a debate as to what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Other religions had resurrection accounts. The debate went on for some time until CS Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the argument about?" His colleagues said they were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. Lewis immediately responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace." After some discussion, the conferees had to agree. The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. It is counterintuitive. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional. Here is the way I believe it works. We do not have to earn God's love with good works. God gives us gifts of grace and love and then we are equipped to go out and do good works.

The Old Testament reading from Isaiah speaks of the vindication of Zion, of Jerusalem. Although the prophet Isaiah proclaimed dire warnings for Israel's lack of faith, he also spoke of God's **redemption** of Israel, of restoring her to her former glory, even to a new glory. This also speaks to a restoration and redemption for us. It is again grace. Through grace Israel was released from captivity in Egypt and by grace was led through the wilderness during the Exodus and into settlement in Canaan and beyond. This is our spiritual legacy.

It seems as if every sermon I write, and this is the fourth, I am called ultimately to redemption. Marguerite asked me recently if my sermons had a theme, and I answered without hesitation: **redemption**. In order to have redemption, God calls us to be willing, like Israel, to enter our struggles and our suffering to find God, to find how we will be redeemed. My redemption has come only when I have finally been able to let go of something. Some of you may know that I grew up in an alcoholic household. I know now that my parents did the best they could, but I didn't always believe that. If you grew up in a kind of chaos, as I did, maybe you developed coping skills, as I did. Those skills served me well when I was young, but they became impediments as I grew older. I struggled with co-dependency, the worry and anxiety about the behavior of everyone around me. I also became hypersensitive to criticism. I was able, with the grace of God, to begin to let go of these issues with the help of good friends, some therapy, and Al Anon, a 12-step organization for families of alcoholics. I have walked through the shadows of fear. I have come out on the other side. This has been grace for me. I am by nature and by nurture still a manager and a controller. But God has had other plans, and letting go of things I can't control has been grace. And I still struggle with that. And God is still patient. There is in grace, forgiveness of ourselves and others, and there is redemption.

Jesus, at his first miracle, set in motion a life and ministry that culminated in redemption. For him and for us.

In the reading from Corinthians, I have been reminded of the three and a half months I spent at St. Stephen's this fall. It is a very small church. On a Sunday, in their one service at 10, there may be 25-30 people. Of those, maybe seven or eight do the work of the church. Besides the altar guild and the choir, they have seven on the vestry. These seven made up my Lay Committee. We met eight times. There is one man who is the treasurer, also on the vestry, and I have seen him do at least five other jobs, including washing dishes. These hard-working folk are using their spiritual gifts to the maximum. Where, you may ask, are the 15 or so others? They are where they are in any church: usually at the Sunday service. It occurs to me that if I am ever to become a priest, I will charge myself with the task of bringing the church and

all it represents to the Sunday morning people and empower them to step out and do the work of the church. People like us do the work of the church: inreach, outreach, altar guild, choir, Sunday School, building and grounds, and much more. We are busy people at Emmanuel. As lay people we can offer our spiritual gifts. Because, without those gifts, churches would have to close their doors. And they have. We are the Body of Christ, and we can be empowered to build up the church.

The extravagant miracle at Cana is a foretaste, a foreshadowing, that points into the future when God will pour out his grace abundantly on the world through a cross and an empty tomb. It is no accident that this particular miracle at Cana took place at a time of great joy and celebration- a wedding. Life empowered by grace is a life that is full of joy-a life worth celebrating.

Each Sunday we gather together in this place. Our celebration is Holy Eucharist. We call the priest a celebrant because it is a glorious celebration. We are celebrating the miracle of grace poured out on each of us through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. As we receive the gifts of God, the body and blood of Christ, let God's grace fill our hearts and minds. Let God's forever love and forgiveness set us on fire to work our own miracles. When you receive Eucharist today, pray to leave at the altar rail any hurt, wound, or fear. Grace offers us the key to unlock whatever holds us in bondage. Experience grace. Receive it. Amen.