

Water into Wine and The Miracle of Abundant Life

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Year C – January 20, 2013

David H. Knight, Priest Associate

In the Name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (thought the servants who had drawn the water knew) the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, ‘Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.’ Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

John 2:9-11

Someone once remarked that weddings can be accidents waiting to happen. It seems that invariably, despite the best laid plans, something can go wrong. At a wedding at Christ Church in Winchester some years ago, the caterer approached me in the sacristy shortly before the wedding was to start. “Father Knight, how long will the service take?”, she asked. An odd question I thought as the bride’s mother was one of these super organized people and I would have thought she would have informed the caterer about such details. I told her it would be about an hour as there would be a homily and Holy Communion. The caterer said “Good,” and then she asked, “Can you make your homily a bit longer?” I was thinking, “This is the quintessence of the bizarre.”

She then told me what had happened. There was no wedding cake. The woman from whom the cake had been ordered never showed up and her husband said she was out of town for the weekend. This caterer, who was very calm and resourceful, had just informed the distraught mother of the bride that she would produce a cake but she would need to buy some time. Hence, she came to me! After the service, in an unusual approach to wedding photographers, I let them take longer than we usually allowed for pictures. The altar guild thought I'd lost my mind. Finally, we would all arrive at the bride's home for the reception. There in the center of it all was a beautiful wedding cake made up of several tiers of sheet cake purchased at a local supermarket yet beautifully frosted and decorated as if done by someone trained at the Culinary Institute of America. Magnificent! Renee's ingenuity and imagination saved the day. Celebration in abundance followed.

In today's gospel reading we hear once again the account of Jesus' first and most well known miracles. On the surface it is a simple story. Jesus and his mother and the disciples were at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. The story reminds us that Jesus loved to celebrate with people on joyous occasions. He wanted them as he wants us to have joy in abundance. Well, it was the third day of the celebration and suddenly the supply of wine was exhausted and a festive celebration was about to come to an end. The host was about to be embarrassed. But then, a miracle happened. But the miracle was not in the magic of water becoming wine, though that was a happy outcome for the moment to be sure. At a deeper

level, and at a level that speaks to the miracle that you and I can experience, it is about the gift of abundant life that Jesus gives to us. We recall that John speaks of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who came into this world that you and I might have life, and have it abundantly.

Abundant life. Where is it that we find abundance in this life? What does it look like? What does it feel like? How do we experience it? Abundance in life is what Jesus intends for us to have, yet that abundance is far more than affluence and wealth. In fact it has little to do with either, though God would want for all to have enough to provide sustenance and enough of the things necessary for us to live. The miracles of abundant life that you and I look for—indeed that we long for—are not of the happy-ever-after variety. Rather, they are of the sort that marks a new beginning as promised by God through Jesus, miracles that include joy in the midst of hardship, kindness in the midst of despair, love in the midst of hatred, a way forward in hope when hope seems illusive. We live in a world that is broken, a world that is full of violence. We live in a world that isn't as it should be. Bad things happen to good people. So many times in things we see around us, it is hard to imagine the possibility of abundant life, yet, in the midst of all that life brings, Jesus says that he has come to us that we might have life and that we might have it in abundance. Certainly in the age to come, when we enter into eternal life, there is that promise, but Jesus says, even while on our earthly journey, he promises abundant life. How could this be?

I want to share with you a story about a family whose journey over the past 25 years or so is a profound example of what abundant life can mean even as life for them has turned out in a far different way from what they had hoped for a number of years ago. I have asked them if I could share with you a glimpse of what has been their story and they have said yes that I could. Last weekend, Jeannie and I drove to New Hampshire where I officiated at the funeral of our very dearest and long-time friend, Jim Lafferty. Jim and Toni had raised four sons a half a generation ahead of our four boys. Their second son Tim and his wife, Joan, are the parents of two sons, Pete and Joe. Tim shared how when their boys were toddlers their hope grew as they thought about their lives and dreamed about who they would become. But life for Tim and Joan, and for their sons Pete and Joe would take a different turn. As infants, the boys seemed pretty normal yet began to show some signs of developmental delays. At the time they didn't think it was a big deal but they decided to let their doctor know what was going on. A few days later they got the call that changed their lives. The doctor told them in no uncertain terms that their son Pete had a muscle disease. Given Pete's diagnosis, there was concern for their other son, Joe. Their worst fears were realized. He had the disease as well. It is called Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy, a progressive, muscle wasting disease that ultimately affects all the muscles in the body. There is no known cure. Ultimately it would claim their lives. Tim recalls how their hearts ached; they ached because they were broken. Five years ago, the disease would end Joe's life at age 20.

Tim looks back at how the first few days after the diagnosis they were devastated as a couple. But nearly a week passed before they made a decision. It was a decision about how they would raise Pete and Joe. “Though their lives would be shorter, we would give them the best lives they could possibly have,” their mother Joan said. “They are God’s gift for us to raise.” As I was talking the other day with Tim, he shared with me that he and Joan knew that they could not do it alone. They decided to place their trust in God. Their whole perspective would change. “We have been given front row seats to see God’s hand at work,” he said. He spoke about how Joe during his life taught them about living in the present and about giving thanks for each day. Pete’s health now is stable, his heart and especially his attitude are both strong. In fact, in 2011, the Nashua-Hudson Toastmasters of New Hampshire recognized Pete’s ease with public speaking by naming him Toastmaster of the Year. Pete manages in a motorized wheelchair and at his grandfather’s funeral on Saturday, he read a poem he had written for his grandfather. In it he shared precious memories. He concluded his tribute with these words:

*I was so thankful to be a part of your life,
And trusting that you now have eternal life,
You’re home with those who went before
And look forward to the day when we’re reunited forevermore.*

Pete’s speaking of his grandfather was a powerful and uplifting moment in the service. You could feel it in the congregation. It

was palpable. The service had been designed such that my homily was to follow Pete. I had to invite the congregation to a moment of silence not only so we might reflect on Pete's words of inspiration, but also so that I could have a moment to collect myself.

As Jeannie and I were driving back home from New Hampshire on Sunday and Monday, it became clear to me that what Tim and Joan, and their sons Pete and Joe have experienced is an example of abundant life in its truest form. In the midst of the turns that life has given them, they have experienced in its fullness, the abundant life that God promises to us even in the circumstances—especially in the circumstances—that we face in life. Their story is an example of the miracle about which the gospel speaks this morning. The miracle of Jesus turning water into wine as we heard in John's Gospel is really about the miracle in which Jesus meets you and me where we are in life and provides for us hope and yes, even joy. In the circumstances we must face, abundant life is possible, and not only in the life to come of which we are promised, but also here and now as you and I are given a foretaste of that heavenly banquet prepared for us.

You and I cannot do it alone. It is God who provides that abundance for which we long. It is at God's table that we are fed. I draw your attention to words that the choir will sing (at the 11:00 service) (in a few moments)

*O sacred banquet! In which Christ is received,
the memory of his Passion is renewed,
the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory to us is
given.*

As you come to God's table this morning, bring with you, your hunger for that abundant life, that abundance that God has promised to us through his son Jesus Christ. Bring that hunger with you, and you—and I—shall be fed. *Amen.*