

**Sermon, 14 January 2007—Second Sunday after Epiphany
Annual Meeting**

Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 96; First Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

Today is the day of our annual meeting, and therefore a day for us to reflect together on the ministry we share here. So it is appropriate that the story of the wedding at Cana arrives through the cycle of our Lectionary, because it depicts a variety of actors, responding together to address a common need. It is good for us, as we prepare for our annual meeting, to reflect on the range of contribution and participation that made the wedding banquet such a joyous occasion. As our dear older brother Paul says, “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” All of us, in the course of our life and even in a single week, bring varieties of gifts and services and workings; none of us support our common life in only one way, but across the full human range of that wedding day at Cana.

First, we have the servants who did all the actual physical work. The amount of wine Jesus provided is staggering—in every sense. There are six stone jars, each holding twenty to thirty gallons, and he tells the servants to fill them to the brim. That is a minimum of one hundred and twenty gallons of wine; and it is provided after all the previous wine has been drunk up. Whatever else will happen at that banquet, Jesus is making sure they won’t run out of wine any time soon.

But this staggering amount of water-into-wine is carried, gallon after gallon, by the servants, who never speak in the story, but who make it all happen. John points out that, although the steward and the bridegroom, the

two men up front, don't know where this wine came from, "the servants who had drawn the water knew." This is, always, where all ministry is grounded, not in the concept or vision or exhortation, not in sermons or guidelines, but in the arms that carry gallon after gallon, and who know exactly how what is giving joy and relief actually came about. Hopefully, even if they smiled with grim satisfaction, the servants tasted the bounty they were distributing.

You do not need from me any comment about this. Every ministry listed on the board in the narthex involves hauling gallons of water—and the water must be hauled, if we are to see it transformed into wine. You already know this. No church cleans itself; no dish heats itself; no altar adorns itself. Every ministry that refreshes and restores and maintains and extends and beautifies and comforts dislodges blocks of time in the life of the person that serves and displaces the centeredness on self in the life of those who live it out primarily as patient commitment. All our joy and relief is wrung from washrags and shaken from dustpans that few of us see handled. Only the servants, who poured the water that was drawn out as wine, know.

This means, in a wondrous way, that only the servants see the miracle up close. Only the servants understand the effort that becomes the banquet. How a home-cooked meal becomes consolation is beyond any human recipe. How trash-bags and vacuum cleaners become welcome cannot be put on any cleaning schedule. How flowers become gratitude cannot be taught.

But the silence of these servants is a lesson also. To release our work into its result, to refrain from gathering for ourselves the fruits of our action, to let our gift truly go into the hands of God, enables the gratitude of the servants as well. Contributing our individual efforts for God to transmute into communal wellbeing, while hoping to be recognized and flattered, blocks our ability to be grateful. Not here, of course, but elsewhere, good

deeds are done much as a waitress might drop off the bill with a smiley face drawn on it; statistics exist to show that doing that gets you a bigger tip. When I make my gift to you waiting for your response, I short-circuit my ability to see what God will do with it, because I am more interested in seeing your reaction to what I have done. Without an ability to watch God at work, I close off my ability to give thanks for what God is doing with what I place into God's hands. If I cannot let go, I cannot give thanks. The servants knew it was just water: they brought it from the well, poured it into the stone jars, drew it out again, and took it to the steward. Precisely because they knew it was water, they knew that they were witnesses to a miracle when the steward protested that the best wine had been kept till last.

We can reflect on bridegroom and steward together, one who underwrites and one who manages. It is worth a smile to notice that, of all those involved in the story, the bridegroom is the least aware of what is happening. I think that is true in most weddings. But the bridegroom, in this case, is the one who provided what makes the feast, placing it in the steward's hands for distribution, trusting him to arrange for the most joyful and bountiful banquet. So it is with us. We, whose new life is celebrated each Sunday and whose new relationship is affirmed every week, make all the provisions for that celebration. It is true that, at any given moment, we cannot account for all that is happening, as God's recreation of us is taking place and this new life of affection and generativity with our beloved is beginning, but the more we bring to the table, for affirmation and for joy, the more is transformed—and we do not know how. Maybe, when all is considered, that is exactly why we make our gift: because we do not know how the transformation occurs, and we must make the gift to see it happen.

The organization of the event is in the steward's hands. He oversees and distributes and manages. If we were to push any of my comments towards a little allegory, it would be that in the steward we have Wardens, Vestry members, and committee chairs. These are the people who ensure that things get to where they need to be. The steward in this story, though, not only distributes; he also appreciates. He makes the comment on the quality of the wine—as well as the gentle rebuke about holding back the best from the feast. The best management cannot occur without appreciation and without gentle rebukes. If banqueting is what we are to be about, then knowing what makes for the best banquet is vital.

If ministry and evangelism and worship are what we are to be about, then knowing what makes ministry empowering and what makes evangelism welcoming and what makes worship joyous is vital. Knowing that, we know that we cannot save the best for last, when it is too late to be recognized and effective. Our delay only shows the recipients that we were not invested in them from the start. You and I both know that a good banquet is arranged towards a happy culmination; there is a reason we serve dessert last. But the steward's rebuke is about not withholding from the moment what would transform the moment. The steward warns us not to show up too late with the gift that, had it been given at the beginning, would have let others know immediately that they are prized, that they are God's Beloved, just as we are. Sometimes, you just have to eat dessert first. God and God's children deserve the first fruits. To place the first fruits on the altar is gives thanks for present and future bounty. It shows our conviction that more fruit is on its way and that God's abundance when it comes to the best is in our hands.

Mary was present. She is the one who names the need—the squeaky wheel, if not the meddler. Jesus seems to brush her off, telling her his time

has not yet come. Notice she sees through his reservation, in her motherly way, and tells the servants to do whatever he asks them to do. Of course, her busybodiness, her perceptiveness, her concern for the success of the feast, is her contribution. She is right in calling Jesus' attention, not to something for herself, but for the common good. Knowing she is right, he responds.

There is an ironic poignancy in her words to the servants: they are the last words Mary speaks when we align the chronologies of the Gospels. We do not hear her voice again. And her last words in Scripture, as many who comment on Scripture observe, her last words to us—her last will, if you will—are to “do whatever he says to do.” That is another component of our common life: attention to the injunctions of Scripture, to the commandments and consolations of our Lord, and readiness to do what we find ourselves there called to do. In our shared ministry, we also need those who remind us that what we are about here is whatever Jesus told us to do.

Then there is the one who works the miracle, so quietly and invisibly. No words of power, no mighty gestures, nothing but the most mundane instructions. Only when the water is tasted is it obvious what has happened. Some day we will reflect together on what business bread has in becoming flesh and wine in becoming blood—or water in becoming wine, for that matter. It is enough this morning to notice that Jesus begins where he ends: a meal with those he cares about. In each case, what is given to be tasted and eaten and drunk is more than what was placed before us at the start, more than we thought it was, more potent and more precious than we expected.

So it is with our mutual ministry here. What we sign up to do, what we do without signing up, what we discover in the moment needs doing, what we end up doing without premeditation or resistance—all this water

that we pour into our granite Saint Cloud jars becomes wine in Jesus' presence. The work and refreshment and beauty that water represents, as we clean with it and drink it and enjoy it, calls to mind the daily flow of our life, cooking and washing and bathing, and simply watching water purify and circulate and sparkle—every part of our routine life can become a wine of power and joy when it is done in Jesus' presence. Even you, who are more water than you are anything else, do not know any more than the bridegroom at Cana knew, that when you taste what you are in the hands of God, you ingest and absorb the best of wines, which has been given to gladden human hearts—all those you encounter and all that you are. That is the wine to place on the altar in thanksgiving; you are the wine that becomes the blood of Christ, who gives life to the world and whom we praise, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, this day and forever.