

Turning the True into the Real

Baccalaureate Mass
June 13, 2009
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I love this gospel story of Jesus turning the water into wine at the wedding feast. It makes for funny situations for a priest.

I was once at lunch with my brother George who is a mechanic in Fairbanks, Alaska. We were in this pizza parlour with some of the pals from the shop where they had lunch most every day. The waitress knew them very well. When she came to our table, my brother ordered the usual: “One plain pizza, and one garbage pizza.” Then he said, “Hey, Cindy, this is my brother, Steve; he’s a priest.” Cindy shot back, “Yeah, sure George, as if you would have a brother who is a priest.” “No he really is” George assured her. Later when she brought the drinks she said to me, “Since you are a priest, I suppose I should bring you wine.” I retorted, “No just bring me water and I’ll turn it into wine!” My brother nearly choked on his pizza for glee. My rich friends tend to keep me away from their wine cellars as I threaten to do a “reverse Jesus” and turn it all into water.

I don’t know if Jesus liked wine, but I do know that he loved weddings. He focused on weddings, like this one, as the best, most-at-hand experience in Jewish peasant village life for what the kingdom would be like, of how our world would be transformed into God’s kingdom on earth. Life in the villages was hard, predictable, unrelieved. Then there was a wedding. Forget our experience: the engraved invitations, tuxes and gowns, stately walking down the aisle of a decked-out church. The wedding in a village was for all of the interconnected, extended, linked families—i.e. for the whole of the village, it went on for days, swept everyone up in dancing, joy, and clearly quite some drinking of wine.

This gospel story says the mother of Jesus was at the wedding in the village of Cana. “Jesus and his disciples were also there.” I like that “also” as if they sort of crashed the wedding. Maybe, even, they were the reason the wine ran out. What does Jesus do at the bidding of his embarrassed mother but have six stone jars filled with water to the brim, each jar holding twenty to thirty gallons, and then he turns the whole lot into the best wine any villager had ever had. You can do the math, that’s 120 to 180 gallons of very good wine. (You wouldn’t mind having Jesus hanging around at your parties!) Jesus transforms the water into wine in order to transform daily, routine village life into an ongoing and exuberant wedding celebration of the whole village together with party-crashers as one very happy, interlinked, transformed community. Jesus keeps coming back to this experience of weddings in his stories, parables, teachings as about the only way the people of his day could glimpse how God would transform their lives and world into the life and world of the Kingdom.

Let me suggest that you are like that water in the six stone jars and let me further suggest that you, our graduates today, are like those jars of water because as the gospel says they are “filled to the brim”. I am sure that coming out of your years of university, just having turned in a final term paper or capstone project, completed a graduate degree, taken a final exam, completed a major, you are indeed filled to the brim.

My question to you is what will turn the water into wine, what will turn what is now true in you into what will be real in you? You know that wars and genocide and starvation in the world are true, but what will make them real. For sure you know that it is true that a life is made beautiful by art, and music, and literature, but what will make that become real? You know it is true that only a life of love and friendship is worth living, but how will that kind of life become real? You clearly accept as true that all people are equal, deserving of respect, your brothers and sisters, so that you have a special obligation to the poor, but what will make this real in your life. You know it is true that God created you, and loves you, forgives you, calls you, but will what you hold to be true become real.

The changing of the true into the real is like the changing of water into wine. You are filled to the brim on this graduation weekend with the water of the true. The question for the weekend is how will all that is already true become the wine of the real, and how will this good wine of the real make possible the joy of the wedding.

I think every person in this cathedral knows that the changing of the true into the real requires that all we know pass through the mill of experience to become the bread of life, or in our image be crushed, and pressed, and fermented in the vat of learning by life itself in order to become reality for us, to really feed and nourish us, to give us joy in serving others.

Of course we know that but it is not enough. Something else is needed to transform the water of what is true into the wine of what is real. That something else—as in the wedding at Cana—is nothing less than the power of God which we access by faith. God did not create the real and then stop. God is continuing to create the real in your life, turning the water of your life into the wine of life itself, in and through your experience as you live that experience with faith. Living life fully with full faith in God has the power to make what is only true into what is fully real. Only from living like this and trusting God in this living comes the wedding, not only the joy of your own life fully real, but more so the joy of our world and humankind itself fully real, which is the Kingdom. Don't worry, there is a party. Jesus knew it and knew how to make it a good one.

I prepared these remarks on Memorial Day weekend in a cabin in the woods near North Bend. On the Friday evening, as I looked forward eagerly to getting to the seclusion of that cabin after weeks of working steadily, I stopped in the Safeway at North Bend to stock up with a few supplies. Coming out of the store, wearing jeans and sports shirt, I heard a chorus of voices across the parking lot, “Wow! Hey, Fr. Steve!” There were about eight SU students with two shopping carts trying to cram everything into an SUV. I went over to say hello, to be greeted by “We're going to Sasquatch in the Gorge”. I could tell from what was in the shopping cart that Sasquatch was quite thirsty and would get his fill... not 120 or 180 gallons, but enough let's say and I kept from any jokes about changing beer into water. They almost sang out—so surprised

perhaps to see me look normal—“Fr. Steve, are you coming to Sasquatch too?” “No”, I told them, “I’m going to hide out in a cabin in the woods all by myself for the weekend”. Somehow I don’t think they were disappointed that I didn’t come along.

I’ve wondered since whether, if Jesus were there, would he have gone with them to Sasquatch or come along with me on my priestly retreat. At least I know from the wedding at Cana whose weekend he’d say better represented what his God is all about, how he promised to change our lives, and what he wanted to do with your filled to the brim lives beyond this Commencement weekend.