

January 17, 2010
Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11
Second Sunday after Epiphany
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

A SKEPTIC MAKES PEACE WITH MARRIAGE

Did you hear about the new book by Elizabeth Gilbert, the author of the popular book from several years ago titled *Eat, Pray, Love*? Her new one is simply: *Committed: A Skeptic Makes Peace with Marriage*.

The memorial service for Meghan next weekend notwithstanding, I can almost count on one-and-a-half hands the number of funerals we've had at Holy Trinity in the past decade. But we sometimes have up to ten weddings a year. The small number of funerals and large number of weddings reflect our neighborhood, our demographics, our relatively good health.

That means I'm more likely to get a call announcing an engagement and a request to set up times for pre-marital counseling than any other pastoral care situation. Weddings, weddings, weddings. I've presided at a lot of them! And in the next several months a council member will get married as well as our candidate for baptism.

And marriage has continued to come at me the past two weeks. Not only does it figure prominently in today's readings, but it's been in the news as well. The cover of *Newsweek* has a picture of two brides. Well, a picture of the two figurines that would be on the top of a wedding cake. And the text is provocative. *The conservative case for gay marriage. The Republican lawyer who won Bush v. Gore is fighting a new battle: equal rights for all.*

You wonder if this can be for real. But sure enough, the brilliant, articulate and conservative Ted Olson believes same-sex marriage is not only an American value, but reflects a fundamental human right. In his words: "Marriage is one of the basic building blocks of our neighborhoods and our nation. At its best, it is a stable bond between two individuals who work to create a loving household and a social and economic partnership. We encourage couples to marry because the commitments they make to one another provide benefits not only to themselves but also to their families and communities." (*Newsweek*, January 18, 2010, p. 48)

But what about marriage in the Bible, the skeptic will ask. Well, it's complicated. What do we do with the reality that in some places divorce and multiple wives were a *man's* right? Or that so many of the New Testament characters, such as Jesus, were apparently unmarried? Or that the man was considered the head of his wife? A little humility would do us well as we admit that many of the contemporary questions we bring to marriage and sexuality are simply not addressed in the scriptures and the social situation of that day.

But there's another reason I'm skeptical. The language of marriage doesn't work for everyone. Some of us are single, by choice or chance. Some of us are divorced or widowed. Some of us wish we were married and others of us are glad we're not.

That's why I'm grateful for today's scripture texts. In these passages marriage is a metaphor that speaks grace to all of us.

Let's start with the reading from Isaiah. Israel was formerly forsaken and desolate. Now the people are called "my delight" and the land is to be "married" to God. What an image! God is pictured as the spouse of Israel. The language is intimate and erotic. No wonder the mystics use wedding imagery to describe the soul's relationship to God. No wonder the scriptures, our liturgy and hymnody sometimes portray the Church as the bride of Christ. God rejoices over the people as a groom rejoices over the bride.

And then there's Jesus showing up at the wedding reception in Cana. Nothing is even said of the bride and the groom. All we know is that the wine has run out. Here is a sign of the incarnation, a sign of God coming among us amid the joy of a wedding and the predicament of need--there is not enough wine!

We know what it is like to host a large party and wonder if there will be enough food and drink. But more often we run out of energy, out of time, out of hope, out of joy. The announcement that a twenty-six year old member of our congregation died of a strange illness fills us with shock and sorrow. As does the unspeakable suffering of our sisters and brothers in Haiti.

Jesus comes to make all things new. To bring abundance to our scarcity. To transform our everyday lives into extraordinary joy. Wine is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Even amid life's most perplexing moments, we drink the cup of salvation, tasting anew God's promise to be with us "in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health," to quote the vows couples make in the marriage liturgy.

Maybe it's the word "marriage" that makes some folks skeptical. In an interview with Elizabeth Gilbert, who I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, she makes the point that the concept of secular "civil unions" works in Europe. I know many people who like that concept of equality. Couples, straight or gay, would only seek a *religious* marriage rite if they so choose. And if their religion offers such a liturgy.

But Americans hold the concept of "marriage" in rapturous reverence, she goes on. That may be why the battle lines are drawn. In this country a civil union will always be seen as a badge of second-class citizenship. Gilbert makes her peace with marriage. Yet what she does have a problem with is couples spending far more time discussing the seating arrangement at the wedding or the color of the bridesmaid's gowns than hashing out their feelings about how they intend to handle questions of housework, child-rearing, finances and fidelity for the next four or five decades. ("Eat, Pray, Love, Then Commit" in *The Wall Street Journal*, January 2, 2010)

I'm all for marriage. For those who find love and want to make public their commitment.

But the skeptic in me will save my rapturous reverence for the marital images in today's texts. I'll make my peace with the epiphany, the spiritual revelation for all of us. What if that were what made the news! With great ecstasy and even erotic passion God loves humankind. That God *marries* the people is a truth in both Judaism and Christianity.

Let me say it this way. Heaven and earth are wed, are married, are joined together. It is the mystery we celebrate in Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. The Word is made flesh among us. There is no distinction between the sacred and secular. God comes near to us in all that it means to be human—times of festivity, times of heartbreak, times of great need. As Jesus showed up at the wedding in Cana, he is made known, he is revealed, in all the places of our everyday lives, both ordinary and surprising.

I have a wedding announcement (not the one that some of you are expecting)! At this table God becomes one with us, becomes as intimate as our very breath. Heaven and earth are married. We are the spouse of the divine lover.

And everything is changed! Water becomes wine. Life becomes new. Whether the cup of sorrow or the cup of joy, our hearts are filled to the brim.

Maybe that's why the eucharist is called a marriage feast.

