

Sunday, January 14 (John 2:1-11)

December 20, 2000

At every wedding we wait for the moment when we witness a bride and groom vow faithfulness to each other “‘til death us do part.” We think when we hear those words, or even more when we speak them ourselves, that death will come to visit much later, at some far distant boundary of a marital union begun today with such promise.

But death is already there. It comes to sit with us at the beginning, else there is no glory, no gravity to the marriages we make by giving ourselves to each other. We do a weighty thing when we commit to sharing most intimately with one partner the brief and precious life each of us gets on this earth. Few of us see the full truth of this, however, until we reach that inevitable moment we named in our vows.

Where is the climax of a couple’s life together? At what point can they see the glory of their union? It’s not likely to be found in the swooning that leads them to marry, nor even in the act we call consummation. Does glory come finally in the fulfillment of family? Or in the peace that comes when the nest empties?

I believe I have witnessed the moment when marital glory reveals itself. It appeared during the dark of night in a dining room converted temporarily into a hospice center. My father lay in a bed there, dying, while I spent nights on a couch nearby and kept watch. Several times in that last week I awakened to see my mother standing over Dad in the dim light. She hadn’t risen from sleep to perform some ministrations. She simply stood for long minutes looking tenderly down at this sleeping man with whom she had shared more than half a century.

I closed my eyes and kept still. Children aren’t supposed to watch their parents’ most intimate moments. But I wondered.

What filled Mom’s mind and heart as she pondered the face, the body, the person with whom she had spent her life? The whole of their life together, I think. The full weight and glory of their marriage now became clear. All they would be together in time and space, the gift they could offer the world as one flesh, had grown to fullness and been offered up. All that remained was to let it rest in God’s hands.

John's Gospel says that Jesus revealed his glory in the first of his signs at a wedding in Cana, and his disciples believed in him. The narrative doesn't tell us just how much of that glory the disciples saw or understood at the time of the wedding, for as Jesus explained to his mother, his hour had not yet come.

In the parlance of John's Gospel, his hour was the time of the crucifixion. In that hour Jesus would take his own bride and his glory would be fully revealed. For now, out in Cana, the disciples and Jesus's mother saw and tasted a new, fine wine that would revive a failing feast. Glorious though it was, however, it was only the beginning.

Shortly after the wedding, John the Baptizer announced another wedding, one at which he would serve as best man, while the Messiah whom John proclaimed would have the bride and be the bridegroom (John 3:25-30). Soon after, Jesus arrived at a well at midday and met a woman (John 4). Many of his forbears had done the same (Genesis 24 and 29; Exodus 2:15-21), but each of them had left with both a drink and a wife. Jesus came away with neither.

Another day came when Jesus asked for a drink, again precisely at midday. This time he received it in the form of sour wine, and with it he took to himself his bride—the whole world of us, whose sins he bore by uniting as one flesh with us. With his mother and the beloved disciple watching, Jesus's glory was fulfilled even as he himself declared, "It is finished."

How fitting that Jesus's glory should commence its epiphany at the wedding of an anonymous couple in out-of-the-way Cana. Like Jesus's life and work, our marriages share in the same irony—the full weight and glory of each appears only when death comes to part the bride and groom.

Outside space and time, the Lamb's high feast takes on eternal proportions, as we see in the Revelation to St. John (21:1-11). Adorned in bridal, baptismal white, the new Jerusalem reunites with her groom and they rejoice forever. Death can come no more to part them.

Here in the realm where death still appears at every wedding and sits silently through our feasts, we continue sharing the wine that Cana's guest brings to our table. Sometimes that wine is sweet and wondrous beyond all imagination. At other times the wine proves sour. We sip it from a sponge like those that the hospice people bring for times when the lips dry up and crack.

Both drinks, however, come from the same cup, the one we share with the Bridegroom who takes us as his own for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, and in whose arms we shall rest when death comes to close off all our other stories. Accordingly, we dress even now in wedding attire. We drink his wine and give our hearts away in the breathtaking risk of believing—a form of falling in love, really.

Then others see his glory in us, a glory poured like new wine into old stone jars. Especially, I think, when we take our last sip from a sponge, the glory of Cana's guest appears and, through the long night of waiting, shows a way toward hope.