**2 Epiphany**

**January 17, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

Some of you may have heard about this, but this week there was a meeting of primates of the Anglican Communion in Canterbury, England. The Anglican Communion is made up of an affiliation of all the Churches that have their roots in the Church of England. This includes the Episcopal Church in this country, and also Churches in Africa, South America, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere where missionaries established churches when England had colonies around the world. The primates are the heads of those Churches … our Presiding Bishop, the Metropolitan and Archbishop of Nigeria, the Primate of Canada, etc.

On Thursday a majority of those Anglican primates asked that the Episcopal Church, for a period of three years, “no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee and that while participating in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, they will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity.” In other words, the leaders of the Anglican Communion around the world have chastised and sanctioned the Episcopal Church in the United States for having passed a resolution at last summer’s General Convention authorizing a liturgy for the marriage of same sex couples. The Episcopal Church has been marginalized and disenfranchised in the Anglican Communion.

 Interestingly, the Bishop of the Diocese of Florida, the Rt. Rev. John Howard, has dictated that this liturgy is not to be used in this Diocese. And, whereas many bishops around the country have written pastoral letters to the people of their dioceses, Bishop Howard has been silent. However, he may be waiting to say something at our Diocesan Convention in Jacksonville next week.

In response to this action our newly elected Presiding Bishop Michael Curry had the following to say:

*“Many of us have committed ourselves and our church to being ‘a house of prayer for all people,’ as the Bible says, when all are truly welcome. Our commitment to be an inclusive church is not based on a social theory or capitulation to the ways of the culture, but on our belief that the outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross are a sign of the very love of God reaching out to us all. While I understand that many disagree with us, our decision regarding marriage is based on the belief that the words of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians are true for the church today: All who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ.*

*“For so many who are committed to following Jesus in the way of love and being a church that lives that love, this decision will bring real pain,” he said. “For fellow disciples of Jesus in our church who are gay or lesbian, this will bring more pain. For many who have felt and been rejected by the church because of who they are, for many who have felt and been rejected by families and communities, our church opening itself in love was a sign of hope. And this will add pain on top of pain.”*

For many Christians one of the “proofs” that Jesus is the Son of God is his ability to perform miracles. In John’s Gospel the story that we just heard is Jesus’ First Miracle … turning water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. However, I believe that the reason for telling the stories of miracles has a much deeper meaning than just to point to some supernatural power. I believe that when we limit our vision of the divine power of God in Jesus to a set of what some would consider mere parlor tricks that we diminish … maybe even debase … the greater truth that is being told.

This story of Jesus turning water into wine follows immediately upon the grand Prologue of John’s Gospel, and then John’s account of the Baptism of Jesus. As a literary devise it is giving us a lens through which to read the rest of the story.

Now listen to the story through a different set of ears. Imagine being invited to a wedding feast … a huge, multi-day event … only to find that the host has run out of wine at the reception. Perhaps the bridegroom was not prepared for so many guests to show up, or he had not planned for the guest to drink that much wine so quickly … or maybe both. But just as the party is getting into full swing, the wine runs out. Then, one of the guests miraculously produces an abundance of wine, and of absolutely superb quality. Life is brought back to the celebration … the party continues unabated … while a group in the corner marvel at the mysterious guest who turned water into wine.

But what if this story isn’t just about a wedding feast in a Galilean village, but about life … our life? Imagine, if you will, that you have been invited to live life in all its fullness, and that you have journeyed to this place in time and space where you, along with others who are celebrating everything life has to offer. It is as if you are all sharing in a spirit that reduces your defenses and inhibitions, and opens your heart and soul to the world around you. Then, suddenly, you find out that there is no more spirit to assuage your thirst … that spirit has run out … it has dried up. Instead of feeling joyous in the company of others you begin to feel lonely and abandoned … even isolated. Instead of feeling like you are a part of a community you feel marginalized. Then, what seems like out of nowhere someone shows up and produces an abundance of spirit … a spirit of a quality that far surpasses anything imaginable. A spirit that brings restoration to your life.

That, to me, is the story of the Wedding Feast at Cana. It is not merely about Jesus’ ability to perform signs and miracles, but about returning spirit and joy in abundance when people are surprisingly and suddenly thrust into scarcity by loss and suffering.

In our first reading today we hear the prophet Isaiah speaking to the people of Israel upon their return to their homeland after being exiled in Babylon. They had been told that they were God’s chosen people, and then it was as if God’s spirit had left them … that it had dried up … and they were overthrown by a foreign army and shipped off to an alien land. They had been invited to a party thrown by their God. They had made a covenant and built a temple, and in the middle of the celebration the wine ran out.

While in exile the Israelites lived with abandonment and fear, but their God did not forget them, and miraculously produced new wine and restored them to their homeland. They were promised a new spirit beyond anything they could imagine:

*You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you.*

And what about that Christian community formed by Paul in Corinth? It was almost as if they feared that the wine would run out before the party really got started. They had been invited to celebrate a new relationship with God through Jesus of Nazareth … not just with their words, but in the way they lived their life as a community. Yet they were divided, and what divided them was the hoarding of what spirit had been given them … as if there was only so much to spread around.

Paul has to remind the people of this community in Corinth that they are living with an abundance of God’s Spirit … that new wine has been poured over them … and each expression of that Spirit has equal value in the community. Remember, those early Christians were people who were often marginalized and disenfranchised … people who had thought that the wine was not even available to them. And yet, in the new community gather in the name of Jesus they had come to celebrate a new spirit far beyond what they could have imagined.

I believe that this is a story that many of us know to be true in our own personal lives. It only takes a few questions to uncover the possibility: When have you accepted the invitation to celebrate your life and fully engaged in the partying … to live your life to the fullest … only to feel like the wine just gave out … that the spirit left you? In what areas of your life have you felt life just slip away, dry up, and leave you parched for some spirit … any spirit … to enliven your heart and soul?

I don’t think it is an experience that is too foreign to many of us. Whether it is discord in a relationship, or a tragic event, a dreaded disease, or even depression brought on by a confusing world, we feel as if that spirit that we knew within us has disappeared. The loss of a loved one, a life-threatening illness, or just getting older and losing one’s independence can feel like a soul-loss. These events can be life changing … some faster working than others. But what they have in common is the thirst for spirit to reinvigorate our lives.

Two thousand years after Paul’s letter to those in Corinth, this community of St. Cyprian’s had a similar experience of feeling like the wine had run out, only to find a new and abundant source of God’s Spirit being poured upon us. In January of 2007 this community of faith was still reeling from the departure of the group who became Christ the King Anglican Church. That group left the Episcopal Church over the issue of how gays and lesbians were being included in the life and leadership of the Church. Today, the people of Christ the King Anglican Church align themselves with those primates who voted to chastise and sanction the Episcopal Church. However, nine years after they left this congregation in disarray, the gifts of the Spirit that Paul spoke about are abundant in this place.

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

Wisdom , knowledge, faith, healing … all gifts of the Spirit that are present within this community of St. Cyprian’s … all working for the common good. When it looked as if the wine had run out for St. Cyprian’s, the abundance of God’s love … known as we take seriously what Jesus took seriously … has restored this community to a full life in our faith that includes all of God’s children.

For many the action of the primates this week is also a sign that the wine has run out. Yet the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine tells us that there is an abundance of excellent spirit in those stone jars. This action is a painful slap in the face to those in the LGBT community, and those that support them. However, in spite of this action, there are communities … such as ours … where the miracle is happening, and the spirit is flowing freely.

The story of the Wedding Feast at Cana reminds us that God’s Spirit is always present and abundant. Jesus had the servants pour water into the stone jars. But these weren’t just any stone jars, these were the stone jars used for the rite of purification. When a person was separated from the community for even a minor reason … when they were marginalized or outcast … and they want to rejoin the community they would participated in the rite of purification … it was a cleansing rite of renewal and restoration to the community. The water for the rite of purification was kept in stone jars, and it was to those jars that Jesus turned. Then, without any action or hand waving by Jesus, he had the servants draw from the jars … and they were filled with wonderful fine wine … in abundance.

We are those guests at the wedding feast, holy vessels awaiting renewal and restoration. Even in our times of thirst, when we feel parched and without spirit, the opportunity awaits us to be filled … to be transformed … to be renewed … to be restored to ourselves and to the community of which we are a part.

The miracle of the Wedding Feast is not merely turning water into wine. The miracle is that God’s Spirit is available in abundance to transform our lives after loss and suffering … loss and suffering that dries up the spirit … and God’s Spirit is available in abundance to transform and return us to the celebration of life … renewed and restored as a beloved child of God. It is definitely a miracle story, but it is about the miracle of the power of God’s Spirit to restore us to the fullness of life and the celebration of the community.

Amen.