

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 17 JANUARY 2010

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

John 2: 1-11

“Reshaped into Abundant Generosity”

Bruce Epperly introduces the second Sunday in Epiphany:

Walt Whitman once noted that “I know nothing else but miracles.” During Epiphany, miracles are to be found in the context of wedding feasts, national restoration, revelatory experiences, moments of call, guiding dreams, and God’s evolving gifts in our lives.
<<http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearC/2009-2010/2010-01-17.shtml>>

Introduction

Last week we heard that “the message of Epiphany is that **you are** God’s beloved child and that God is moving in and through your life and the world”. [*emphasis is mine*] (Bruce Epperly <http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearC/2009-2010/2010-01-10.shtml>).

“You are!” Your **self** is named, loved, affirmed and invited into the intimacy of communion of truth, honesty, grace and love. And this naming, loving and affirmation, this receiving of our new self is what our baptism is about. And, again, last Sunday, as we looked at the story of Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist, I suggested that in this baptism Jesus gained a surprising new understanding of his self, his identity. And that this was a broad identity because baptism is not a simple religious, private event, but has social, political, cultural, psychological and spiritual dimensions as well.

I shared that Anthony Elliot, in his recent book, *Concepts of the Self*, suggested that we forge and sustain a sense of self through the everyday routines of life (2). That we engage in various forms of **brand loyalty**, of social identification with clothing and shoe brands, Nike, with newspapers, with brands of theology, evangelical or progressive, or brands of denomination, styles of worship. We select and limit ourselves to certain identities.

To repeat what I said last week:

What Elliot attempts to impress on us is that “various social, cultural, political and psychological aspects of the self” shape, reshape and make us **who we are**. We make choices and are influenced by our world.

This formation of the self is both a *private affair* where we have freedom and express agency, as well as a *structural and cultural affair* in which others, parents and society exert an influence upon us, shaping and forming us.

Finally, I suggested that Jesus in his baptism was redefined by that event. As he arose from the water the Creative Spirit of God, in the form of a bodily dove hovered over him, as the Spirit hovered over the chaos of the unformed world in the beginning of creation, and created new life! Jesus was named, loved and affirmed by his loving Parent! He becomes free of restrictive brand loyalty and

begins an audacious life!

1. The first act of Jesus as abundant generosity!

In this second week of epiphany, our Bible reading tells us about the first act that this newly reconstructed Jesus performs. He changes water into a very large quantity of quality wine at a wedding feast. This is an event of abundant generosity, again revealing that the God of the future is already releasing new life and possibility in the present.

John often uses the imagery of weddings and wedding feasts. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus also uses the wedding and wedding feasts as symbols and signs of the end of time God sharing great feasts with humanity. The Old Testament also has many images of weddings symbolising the future meetings of celebration with God. So the readers would have been familiar with these images and symbols. What is new is that it is Jesus who creates the possibility for this kind of end-time celebration. Jesus is portrayed here as the generous giver and provider of the feast of abundant, good quality wine, that create celebrative community.

"Clearly, the God that Jesus revealed is a God of lavish liberality, generosity and extravagance." (Dan Clendenin, *The Miracle at Cana: A Whole Lot of Strong Wine.*)

Wine was very important. It was the normal beverage at meals - and especially at festivals. Wine was a symbol of joy. One ancient rabbi stated, "Without wine there is no joy." (Brian Stoffregen, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john2x1.htm>)

In the OT, an abundance of good wine is an eschatological symbol, a sign of the joyous arrival of God's new age:

"On this mountain the God of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines" (Is 25:6a).

"The mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it" (Amos 9:13cd).

"In that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, the hills shall flow with milk" (Joel 3:18a).

2. How does this joy and abundant generosity find expression in our identities?

How does this joy from the future and this abundant generosity find expression in our lives?

And our story is full of images to invite a new relationship to joy and abundant generosity!

The six stone jars full of ritual water carry their own symbolism and illustrate an invitation to move from old forms of being to new forms. Stone jars were made out of stones so that they would not contract impurity. They were used to purify the hands before eating, representing the religious observances of Judaism. By changing the water into wine, Jesus symbolises that such impurity no longer matters, and that religion is transforming into generous giving and celebration. Gail O'Day (*John, The New Interpreter's Bible*) suggests:

"New wine is created in the 'old' vessels of the Jewish purification rites, symbolizing that the old forms are given new content."

Surely our story invites us to be nourished, enriched and reshaped through this story!

3. What this means for us

When we experience real and genuine enrichment within ourselves and our relationships - and this can occur in many ways - we can be reshaped.

Babette's Feast is a film that tells a story of such reshaping and experience of abundant generosity.

It is a story from Danish writer Isak Dinesen, 1958, and made into a film in 1987.

In this story a most famous cook, Parisian Babette, flees the Communard uprising in 1871 and is taken in by two sisters, Martina and Philippa, the leaders of a small strict Danish Protestant community.

The lives of the two sisters are a picture of people living within limited identities, or brand loyalties, a story of waste according to one interpretation.

As a girl, Philippa is discovered by a famous opera singer but she finally rejects the offer to be the world's greatest diva. She returns to lead her bickering congregation in her village once her father dies. One line in a song defines her story: "I am afraid of my own joy." What a marked comparison to the themes of joy in our biblical story!

Philippa's sister is equally held by parental and institutional values and ideals: she rejects the cavalry officer, Lowenhielm, to devote herself to her father's congregation.

Endearing sisters, pious but not cold, yet giving their special talents to a barren world absorbed in its petty fights.

After some years, Babette wins the lottery and wants to do something for the sisters who have taken her in. So she prepares an exquisite and sumptuous feast.

The sisters and the church members agree to eat the food, but not to enjoy or praise it. Only Lowenhielm, who returns a decorated general, tastes the transcendence of the seven-course meal.

For the others, it is merely not-cod. And then, the miracle occurs, when these stern old puritans are seduced by the *baba au rhum* and the champagne (which is mistaken for lemonade).

The meal changes the lives of all those invited.

This is a film about human and cultural interaction, and especially between the dutiful sobriety of Protestant northern Europe and the sensuousness of the Catholic south.

It is also about human needs, and how warmth and kindness can be expressed and stimulated through the cultivation of the senses.

Babette's Feast is a story about food which nourishes, or should I say, unlocks closed selves and lives and allows:

- spirit to be reconciled with the wonders of the flesh,
- people to be enlightened with their closed lives,
- and people to be reconciled with the lives of others they have excluded because of community and institutional values and brand loyalties.

Conclusion

When we experience real and genuine nourishment, and this can occur in many ways, our lives are unlocked:

- our spirit is reconciled with our flesh;
- our inner life is known, accepted in its murkiness and frailty as well as in its beauty and groundedness:

unlike the priest who came to Jung and was told to sit in silence daily to find his inner self, but who could not bare to be in his own silence, the hungers of our heart are heard and nurtured and tended

- thus freeing us to see the other;
- our conflicting values are addressed and institutional discourse is challenged.