

Preaching at Weddings

Calculating an abundance of grace

by

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*There were at hand six stone water jars, each holding 15 to 20 gallons.
(John 2:6)*

Do the math. The miracle at Cana yielded enough wine to fill 120 Coleman jugs, 1,280 water bottles, or 3,072 typical five-ounce servings. Clearly, the biblical passage illustrates an abundance of grace.

The ancient Greeks had a word for speeches on such occasions: epideictic. It was a style of oratory that united a community in giving thought to the virtues that formed the core of its existence.

For modern-day homilists, wedding ceremonies provide an opportunity to “name the grace” at the core of its life. Liturgies that brim with praise for God-with-us—in “real time”—demand a particular type of discourse.

Not a commencement address

In the world of classical rhetoric, epideictic speech sought to draw attention to the sacred dimension of human existence. Eventually it evolved into a glorification of human achievement, and the word became synonymous with a showy display of empty rhetoric.

Homilists at weddings and other special occasions risk the same judgment, when they ignore the wonder of God and, instead, deliver pedantic advice, such as is often the case with a commencement address or the heaping of praise on an athlete at a sports banquet.

The nuptial blessing

The wedding homilist is the opportunity to collaborate with the engaged couple in uncovering the subtle but concrete ways in which the Spirit has drawn them together. Gentle probing will yield material for identifying “real time” grace: When do you pray for each other? When do you sense God’s involvement in your love for each other? How does your love mirror the love of God?

In addition to the Scripture passages suggested for use at weddings, the prayer texts of the liturgy, the vows and, especially, the nuptial blessing provide points of entry into the practical ways in which God’s Spirit is at work in the life of the engaged couple.

A living icon of Christ

St. Paul describes marriage as a deep mystery. The nature of mystery lies in its mysteriousness. Attempts to analyze a mystery—as opposed to illuminating its beauty—tend to distract the listener from the wonder of God.

Wedding homilies are excellent opportunities to reveal the face of Christ reflected in the courageous

faith of a bride and groom as they promise to love and honor each other for the rest of their lives. Despite the distractions of photographers and caterers, stone water jars line the walls in God's storage room.

These jars wait to be filled!

Porch lights, kitchen lights, and a candle on the nightstand

(This homily excerpt illustrates the way in which epideictic discourse heightens the awareness of God's grace at work in the sacrament of marriage.)

“You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.”

In this passage, Jesus talks about light. Not the blaze of the summer sun or the sharp flash lightning. Rather, to illustrate the gift of his grace in our everyday lives, he compares grace to something as ordinary as a lamp on a table in a living room that gives light to all in the house.

Like a night light in a hallway that guides a parent to a room where a child is sick. Like that light on the porch that welcomes good friends to your door. Like that fluorescent bulb above the kitchen table where left-over meals are consumed for the second time this week.

God's light permeates our home. Like the glow from the computer screen as you chart your household budget and pay your bills online. Like the glow of a candle on a night stand as a husband and wife recite their prayers at the close the day.

In these and countless other ways, God's light glides into our life, guides our decisions, and sanctifies our days. Like light that streams into a darkened room through a crack beneath the door, God's light soothes our fatigue, our loneliness, our doubt, and our fear.

We offer praise to God for the gift of this light. This marvelous light, which, today, shines in the heart of our community through the love of David and Jacqueline. Their joy is our delight. Their faith, like God's word, is a lamp unto our feet.