**Holy Conversations**

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

November 13, 2022 ~ Day of the Annual Parish Meeting

John 2:1-11

The wedding at Cana took place at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He had called his disciples and they were with him. But they did not yet know who he was. When Jesus transformed the water into wine, they understood. Their eyes were opened to the presence of God. The faith that was dormant within them came alive. Hearing this Gospel today, there is an implicit suggestion that God might reveal God’s self through our gathering. In Cana of Galilee transformation of the disciple’s lives occurred as water became wine. How might such a transformation occur for us?

Transformation is a big word. Like conversion. A change in some essential aspect of our orientation and being. Did you come here seeking transformation? Most days, my hopes are a bit simpler. But in recent years, when I lead the Inquirer’s class and meet with those exploring St. Columba’s, I begin by stating my hope: that if you participate in the life of this congregation, that in three, four, five years, by the grace of God, you will be able to look back and say, my life has been changed.

Not in the same way for each of us. We may say, I have learned how to pray and through prayer have come to an awareness of God in my life. I have found a sense of peace. I have become more generous. Generous in how I view those about me, more patient with the people in my household. I have had opportunity to cross boundaries and come to know those whose lives differ from my own. My commitment to you, I say, is that if you show up, we will offer you ways to pray, ways to serve, ways to give. Call me crazy, but my hopes for each of you – for each of us – are large indeed. This is because I believe in and have experienced the transforming power of the love of God in Christ Jesus. I have heard many of you bear witness to just such a change. For Jesus, transforming water into wine was just the beginning.

Picture, if you will, life at St. Columba’s these days as a great wedding banquet. Amid the dancing and eating, myriad conversations about the matters on our hearts and minds. I’ve been in lots of conversations.

Most immediately, prompted by this six week season using a trial liturgy and readings with a “womanist” perspective. The change in prayers and readings and some of our guest preachers have evoked strong feelings across a very wide range. This comes as no surprise. When the words of our liturgy change, then the very words with which we address God are changed, affecting us in ways that are personal, intimate, profound. In two weeks, we’ll have an opportunity to reflect and evaluate, share our impressions and thoughts – in conversation or in writing.

Some are discussing worship. Others are having conversation about becoming anti-racist, what it means for us to repent and repair, and how we feel about that. Still others are having conversation about the best use of our property for mission and how we plan for the future. Or how we can further our commitment to end family homelessness. How do I support my child as she, he, or they explore new landscapes of gender identity and sexual orientation? Conversations among those who are grieving. Among those living alone. How to relaunch the Water Ministry. How to meet, serve, and engage people on line instead of in person. How to secure the financial resources. How to engage the children and youth of our congregation, to awaken and honor the faith that is within them, and equip them with the practices of faithful discipleship.

To say out loud what you already know, a lot of these conversations are exciting. And a lot of them are hard. Hard because we feel, believe, passionately about the matter at hand. Which means these conversations are absolutely essential. Deep, good, respectful, hard, essential. And, I dare say, holy. Holy conversation. This is just the very thing we need to be doing. The intention is not to get it right, certainly not to win. We need not agree. We may disagree, strongly.

Some years ago, I was privileged to spend quite a bit of time working with our former presiding bishop, the Most Rev. Katherine Jefferts Schori. The first woman to serve as Presiding Bishop. Literally shunned by some of her fellow archbishops from the global south, Katherine knew about controversy. During her tenure, she frequently spoke of conversation as a spiritual practice. I quote: “the word ‘conversation’ has its origins first in Latin and then in Middle English, where it means ‘to spend time with.’ [‘To abide.’ With feminine roots,] it's much more about being with, rather than using words. It has the connotation of being in community, coming to know others in the intimate way that only is possible in proximity, sharing food, business dealings, likes and dislikes, even prayer and Eucharist. It is an art and style of being that often is wanting in the culture around us.” Citing controversies then embroiling our nation and church, she said, “We have a better way — in the deeper kind of conversation that comes of seeing the image of God in our neighbors, even and especially when we disagree with them.” *Conversatio morum* is integral to the Rule of St. Benedict, translated as fidelity, fidelity to the vows of community.

Dear ones, at this party, as we engage with personal integrity and with fidelity to the community, we are practicing our faith. Says Mirabai Starr, “We each need to bring the best of who we are to the spiritual table and offer our own imperfect selves as the medicine for the critically ill spirit of humanity. This includes our despair and our ecstatic insights, the shadow we are most ashamed of and the crazy wisdom with which we astonish even ourselves.”

One way or another, we’re addressing the question posed by new monastic Shane Claiborne, “what if Jesus actually meant what he said?” In recent years, we’ve taken a collective leap of faith. We’ve made commitments: to becoming anti-racist, ending family homelessness; to loving God, to loving our neighbor as ourself. It's one thing to announce, “let’s go to the promised land!” Turns out, the journey is going to change us, transform us. My fervent prayer of late? Show us the way, O God. Show us the way. Be the light upon our path. Be in our speaking. Be in our listening.

Maybe you’ve not been having these conversations. If you prefer it that way, well and good. You may want anonymity as you offer your prayers to God.

If you want a chance to engage, I’ve got a couple of invitations. But before I go there, I’ve got to say that sometimes this can feel pretty serious. And much of it is, but being serious isn’t always helpful. I just took a six week DC Improv Comedy Class. It was great. I was already the start of a joke. A priest walks into a comedy class. No, I didn’t wear my collar. The guiding principle of improv acting is “yes, and.” To receive what’s given – a story, an action – and then go with it and take it somewhere else. It reminds me of martial arts, receiving the energy of the other. To be out there without a script, and not know what may be coming your way, you can’t have a preplanned agenda, you have to pay attention, be awake, be engaged, be with the others in the circle. Most of our warm-up exercises were physical – with our vocal chords as the choir does. Then we might stand in a circle and toss around an imaginary ball. You had to receive the ball that was tossed to you – little, big, heavy, light, squishy, spongy. Then you could change the shape before you tossed it to the next person. And do this really fast! Yes… and!

God knows there’s plenty to be serious about these days, so take care to find ways you can laugh, smile, take delight, receive or share joy and wonder.

On this note, I want to say, if you have not yet taken the leap of faith and made a financial pledge to St. Columba’s, now is the time to do so. It will literally make you feel better. Giving gifts, giving generously, lavishly… giving frees something in us, opens us. It also connects us. We have some skin in the game. And it deepens our intentions. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also, said Jesus. The treasure precedes. So run, don’t walk, to your nearest pledge card – paper or electronic. And, Wow! Wow! Thank you to the hundreds of you who have pledged, and the many, many, many who significantly increased your gift. This is the transformational party of Cana. This is the spirit of the living God moving in, among, and through us. This is the better way that Bishop Katherine speaks of. This is us being the change we seek.

Two last things and I’ll sit down. If you want to engage in conversation and you’re one of the one hundred fifty households who choose to worship on line, we’re creating on-line Columba Circles, gatherings for this very purpose. You can wait for a future announcement, or send me an email now saying, “I’m in. Sign me up.”

And, if you’re game to be out and about, come to a Wednesday night supper. I’ve never seen anything like it. On any given night, I’ve had supper and conversation with some of our most senior parishioners, and with little children running and laughing, with those who first learned about it as guests of our Water Ministry, with neighbors who live next door Friendship Terrace Senior Living. I tell you, it is a glimpse, a foretaste of that heavenly banquet. If you close your eyes, even the water, even the lemonade, tastes like the finest of wines.