I read from John 2. A wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus mother was there as were the disciples. Jesus mother came to him to tell him that there was no more wine. Then she turned to the waiters and said, “Do whatever he tells you.” Nearby there were 6 stone jars filled with water. Jesus asked the waiters to draw some out and take it to the head waiter, who tasted it, not knowing where it came from. The head waiter said, “Most people take out the choice wine for the first round and serve some cheap wine towards the end of the party. But you have saved the best for now.”

My favorite couple in the endearing romantic comedy “Love Actually” is Jamie and Aurelia. Jamie is English and a writer. Aurelia is Portuguese and has a temp job cleaning houses. Jamie speaks no Portuguese. Aurelia speaks no English. They meet in Southern France where Jamie has gone to write a novel.

Day after day, they go through their respective routines, make the briefest communication, both wanting more. They start speaking to each other in full sentences, knowing that the other can’t understand them at all, and it gives them both a certain freedom from the anxiety of attraction when you are afraid to let others know that your heart is racing. This goes on day after day, words exchanged that neither of them can understand but delivered with emotional cues that we can all read subliminally. One day she motions to him that she needs him to drive her home soon. He reaches over, touches her on the arm, and says in English that

she can't understand, "You know, it is my favorite time of day, driving you home." She walks away from him, turns and says in Portuguese that he can't understand at all, "You know, leaving you at the end of the day, is the saddest time." There is something so wonderful about people being free of all of the guarded games that make the chase of romance and just putting themselves out there in that very vulnerable way. Spiritually, it is just very beautiful. You can almost see everyone in the audience yelling "Don't hold back kid, jump in, just go for it." Life is short, you get a blessing, go and don't look back.

I love weddings because of that positive energy. They are so full of promise and expectation. As a Minister, I get to avoid almost all of the anxiety of weddings- no my job- and talk to couples about their hopes and their dreams, even those that come rather sheepishly for their third marriage. I remember saying to one such man, "Look, you clearly believe deeply in marriage; you just aren't very good at it." It is like my golf swing. Sane people would find another hobby. But there is something about the hope of faithful love that draws us back again and again to this crazy jumbled comic-tragedy.

No matter what age they get married, couples are just bubbling with expectation and that good kind of nervousness. I had one bride that was over 60 years of age, could barely get her vows out. She was so full of that 'what am I doing' combined with that deep fullness of emotion that weddings bring. She was almost stumbling over herself. It is so endearing that Brides are almost always that way, from 26 to 86.

We had another couple that had been together for 15 years, but because they were gay, never felt like they could have a wedding until a few years ago. All that waiting, all of those complicated issues with relatives that love them and can't really accept them, and all that love that they could finally express publicly. What a wonderful day that was for them, for their families, their friends.

The music may be nice, the flowers pretty, the readings inspiring… But what we have come to hear, what we have come to support is these couples facing each other, holding their hands, looking one another in the eye in front of all their family and friends saying "In the name of God I Bill take you Susan to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, as long as we both shall

live". Those vows stick to the ribs. And frankly, they point us towards the more profound love that we humans are given to know.

In our text this morning, Jesus performs his first miracle at a wedding. He shows up with the disciples. His mother comes to him and tells him that the host of the party is running very low on wine.

We have no explanation of why they are running out of wine, but notice that they run out of wine just shortly **AFTER** Jesus and the disciples show up…. Kind of like my fraternity brothers who just happened to be standing nearby when the beer keg in college when it mysteriously ran dry.

As the Dean at Wake Forest once said to us after a college party got a little carried away, "Gentlemen, you exhibit an astonishing commitment to alcohol!!!" Perhaps Mary was turning, not to our Lord the miracle worker, but to her son and his friends, the wedding crasher party boys- like Mother's will do.

It is true that every good wedding needs wine to make glad the heart in celebration. More than that, thinking about the deeper symbolism of this story, it is true that **every marriage needs a miracle**. The caterer says to the groom in the presence of Jesus, "Most people serve the best wine first, and break out the jug

wine after everyone is tipsy… but you have saved the best until last." And man is that tricky in marriage, isn't it? To to be able to honestly say to your spouse, 'we've saved the best for now."

After my mother died, I was standing in my Mother's house, leafing through a pile of photos that she had on her desk. It looked like they had been in the same spot for decades. All these images I'd forgotten. I came across one. It was a picture of my wife holding our two oldest children at one and a half and infant. That photograph was over 40 years old. I held that photograph closer.

That was the girl that I fell in love with. As I looked at the picture, I said out loud, "Good God, I married a child". And make no mistake, she married a boy- Impetuous, volatile, unpredictable, crazy, arrogant, insecure. I picked up my cell phone, called her, and said "***what were you thinking***?"

Our home is slowly, slowly emptying of children. Couple years ago, when it was time to go on vacation, we suddenly realized, it is just the two of us. I don't think we've ever really taken a vacation the two of us, a couple days here and there, but not two weeks. There was some anxiety about it, I'll tell the truth. We were headed to Canada, but still on the Garden State Parkway. I said, "honey,

what if it suddenly hits you at the New York State Thruway that you can't stand me anymore?"

"Well" she said, "I just wish I didn't know you so well?""Really? Why is that? " I said. "**Because then I'd find your stories more interesting**.""Oh yeah, well did I ever tell you about the time I was in Mexico?" "Yeah… you met a convict and ran out of gas". "Did I ever mention the name Leon Wurthler". "Right he knew Bruce Springsteen… had a tattoo you couldn't believe." On and on this went until I gave up… Finally, I said, "I think we are becoming one those couples you see in truck stops that sit there at the table both completely silent with each other waiting for their food to be served." "No", she said, "**we just need to make some new stories."**

That is most certainly true. How do you keep your relationship vital and interesting? How do you keep that spark, that magic that motivated us to begin with? This is the question I was asked to reflect on this week, so I turned that back to a group of my colleagues recently, what are some of the spiritual secrets to keeping a relationship alive? One of the youngest in the group volunteered. All eyes turned in that direction as they said, "**Forgetfulness**".

It is a great observation and true in its own way. And it is important in its demeanor as well, acknowledging as it implicitly does, that 'We have no idea'. I used to think I had a few ideas about marriage. But over the years, I have seen so many different marriages that worked for couples in so many different venues that I came to the interiorize that sense of 'I have no idea' and now I am just intrigued by the manifold variety of what is possible and very reluctant to pass judgment.

"As long as we both shall live"… I've reflected on that line. That is a big commitment. It feels so ultimate. Plato once observed that God must have created us in pairs at the creation of the universe. That is why, he said, we seem to spend our lives looking for our other half, that special someone that will complete us. That sentiment is regularly expressed with breathy optimism not just at weddings but each Valentine's Day with Hallmark fuzzy gauze. It is one thing to feel that optimism at the beginning of a romance but it is quite a different thing to feel that at towards end isn't it? The longer you stay in your marriage, the more relationships that you see around you that fail or that seem to slowly disintegrate into ennui, boredom, independence, and isolation under one roof, the more you reflect on Plato's actual intent- how unlikely it is that out of the millions of people

in the world, you could ever actually meet your genuine compliment… The longing is deep for completion, but completion itself is elusive.

"As long as we both shall live"…. What could be the positive spiritual reason for making such an ultimate commitment? It certainly is not gauzy optimism as the scripture knows nothing of that. And it can't be something as banal as the social control that is necessary for families to be stable, although stability in families is clearly important. The only very limited insight I've developed about it, is that is a pre-condition for engaging in the most profound level of spiritual living that God intends for us.

We keep wishing that we could find a partner that could just automatically unlock the secret in us, much in the same way that Mark Twain thought of his wife when he said, 'wherever she was, there was Eden.' But we know, deep down, that real fulfillment comes not in finding the right partner but in becoming the right partner.

Right, and what does that mean? I can't answer that for you. Only you can answer that and I suspect your spouse might have helpful insight here as well.

Our lives are constantly in a process of change. Each of the different chapters of our lives present us with new challenges and the necessity for growth, which means developing a new skill set or not developing a new skill set and then living with frustration.

Just now, I've been watching another generation having their first babies. You can read books about it, think you know something about it by growing up with children around you in your wider family. You can attend your birthing classes- but there still comes that night when you are home from the hospital, everyone's gone, and you are holding this teeny, tiny fragile bundle that is crying and you are thinking, "Oh my God, I could break this baby"…"I have no idea why this baby is crying"… "Here you take her"… "What the hell are we doing?" And you suddenly realize that you are woefully unprepared for this and that if anything serious were to happen, you wouldn't have the foggiest idea what to do and it just settles over you in this invisible weighty wave that you have taken on a lot of responsibility, and 'O My God… help'.

You have to figure it out together. You have to grow up together. And pretty quickly, you have this crashing encounter with reality. You think you are pretty

helpful. You think you know what your spouse needs and what you should bring to the table until--- until—until they tell you in no uncertain terms that they are taking care of two children and you are one of them.

You get defensive, hurt, angry. One of my relatives used to draw an invisible line down the room or down the bed- if that is the way you feel, you stay over there. Fine. Fine, and I'll stay over here. I love that technique.

But when you get reflective about, you realize that actually you didn't really have the greatest role models in the world growing up and that well, actually, you need to be better (within limits- don't make me change too much) and that, well, perhaps we could talk about this- and you are actually bored on your side of the room, all alone and everything. And somewhere in the middle of the night perhaps, lying in the dark in your bed with your spouse on the other side of that invisible line, you actually are able to say it out loud, "I want to be better at this." And if you are really lucky, you might hear back, "So do I."

Most of our significant fights start over issues that may seem not all that important. Very quickly they become important, and charged with subterranean emotion, because they point up areas in ourselves where we are limited, where

we really need to grow to tackle the next phase of life. Frequently, we don't want to grow like that. Sometimes, we have no intention of growing like that at all-- ……. but we must.

These changes are usually very difficult. That is why marriage, and our deepest friendships, can be so difficult because it is so challenging. Very rarely do we have to make these kind of profound changes anywhere else in our lives. Our jobs mostly just ask us to execute a set of skills and to be professionally respectful. Our neighbors just ask us to be polite and social. Even most of our friends only ask us to be fun and to share with them.

But deep friendships and marriages keep peeling back the onion, a layer at a time, so that we are getting more of that inner core of your person exposed. That is what intimacy is all about. And once you get down below a couple layers of insulation that is the image you project to the rest of the world, once we get behind that and start dealing with more with your psyche, your soul, who you really are. That is tougher. That is much more sensitive. And that is much harder to change and even to want to change. Marriage though and really profound friendships, they make you change. The profound relationships actually help you

change, encourage you, and support you. But if you didn't have to do it, you wouldn't. Important spiritual development is like that most of the time.

When I was in seminary, I took probably 7 courses on psychology. I did two internships as a chaplain inn the emergency room and on the psych ward and you have to be involved in group therapy and one on one counseling for a couple years. I hated all of that counseling and therapy at the time but I'm glad I did it.

I don't remember much of the content but through this long, involved process, getting in touch with my upbringing, with my defense techniques, my issues, though that is what I was doing.

What I remember is that there came a point where it just settled over me existentially that I need to change. I need to grow- not that it is just going to make me a better Minister, although that would be good too; not that it will make me a better husband and father, although that would be good too. I need to change and be open to change because this is the point of my life. That is the best gift I can actually give to my wife, my family, my closest friends, to the congregation.

That, and the other thing that they teach you in all these classes and courses, how to listen. Can you really listen to your spouse? To your closest friends? Can

you pay attention to what is going on with them- what they are going through and what they need out of you? Very difficult because most of the time they don't really know. And one thing you learn in these courses, 90% of us, if graded on our ability to listen, would be either 'poor' or 'downright pathetic'. Can you pay deeper attention? I'm not good at it but at least I know I'm not good at it. Too many of us aren't even aware that we are nearly oblivious… until that plate hits the wall.

I need to change. I'm listening.

I pray for people in the congregation regularly. I just envision you and what you are going through that you would grow into it holistically. Parents with teenagers and I have yet to meet anyone that honestly think they are competent to tackle that phase of life; spouses trying to figure out what to do now that their kids are fairly well on their own; spouses that are being forced to make a career change not when they want to because of a down turn in the economy; spouses that need permission to follow a dream and launch some new venture that they've been wanting to do for years; spouses that are living with debilitating illness; spouses who after many, many years of happiness are watching their loved one disappear before them to dementia becoming a primary care-taker rather than a

lover; spouses who have to let their loved one go and walk with them up to the portal of death.

We are never really prepared for any of that. Some of it, frankly, we don't want to prepare for.

Our lives fall in chapters around these challenges that come at us. Explicitly or implicitly, we find ourselves pledging again, in a new and different way, in a very different context than when we started out- "to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, as long as we both shall live." Every marriage needs a miracle. I need to grow.

Love can be profound. We can make each other feel safe, secure. We can be a refuge. We can be comfort and strength to one another. We can inspire. We can encourage. We can provide moral resolve. We can help each other sort it through. Even better than forgetting, we can forgive. We can be hope. We can be the catalyst so that our loved ones can bloom into realizing the full potential of what God created them to become. This is the possibility of a profound spiritual life shared with others.

Make no mistake, it is difficult. And it will challenge us to the core of our being. That is why it is so painful and reflective when it doesn't work, when we have to say we are not able to stop hurting each other, we can't grow to where our spouse wants us to go. We've let others in to our inner sanctum… that is a deep hurt and you think about it over and over and over wondering if you had done this or done that. That is tough when it doesn't work.

We make these ultimate commitments because it is that challenging to realize the depths of what is spiritually possible for us. And the possibility is rich.

What is the one thing that you need to develop in you to be a better spouse? What gift of growth in you, or perhaps you and your spouse that would help grow your family? Married or single, what would your friends most like to see you become better at that would bless them and those closest to you?... The chances are pretty good that you know what your issue is. And if you don't, ask. I just bet that your loved ones will help you here.

Brothers and sisters, Siblings, St. Paul was right, "faith, hope, and love abide- but the greatest of these is love. Grow in love and may your life unfold in love in all of the profundity that you have to offer. Amen.

Our first reading is from Isaiah 54. It depicts God's relationship with us having a similar contention like we have in our most intimate family relationships. "For God has called you somewhat like a spouse that is feels forsaken and aggrieved by you, like a spouse that has been mistreated and is angry. Says God, "For a brief moment, I would not talk to you in anger, but with even greater compassion, I will draw you close again. In my wrath, I hid my face from you but with everlasting love, I will redeem you and bless you in compassion."