

Homily for the marriage of George Gatch and Erica Fite
30.vi.2019, Chapel of Saint James the Fisherman,
Wellfleet, Massachusetts
Milton McC. Gatch

I am always moved by the great hymn we just sang, "The Spacious Firmament on High." I love the stirring chorale music from Franz Joseph Haydn's oratorio *The Creation*. I love Joseph Addison's eighteenth-century Enlightenment paraphrase of a psalm in praise of creation. I love its sometimes quaint phraseology: God is not named but is "our great original"—the creator. Like Addison's own newspaper *The Spectator*, the heavenly bodies are publishing far and wide—in an international edition—that they are "the work of an almighty hand"; the stars are "singing as they shine, 'The hand that made us is divine.'" Great stuff!

Those of us who come to this part of Cape Cod year after year resonate to that view of creation. Oh, we know now that the universe is not static but expanding. We know that our race is undermining nature. Many of us don't believe in God. But it is a hard heart that does not thrill to nature, to the complexity and the ingenuity of the cosmos, in which "this fragile earth [is] our island home."

Out here on the Cape, we *feel* that greatness of creation, we feel that there is order and intelligence—genius, indeed—in our world. We marvel at it. George and his sisters used occasionally to get up very early to see the sun rise out of the ocean; many of us flock daily to the bay beaches to see the sun sink beyond (seemingly into) the water, leaving behind an ever-different display of color and light. In the dark of night we look up and marvel at "the vast expanse of interstellar space" gleaming in the black sky. Even in storms, lightning and thunder booming toward us across the Cape Cod Bay, there is something majestic, although it is often frightening: like the anger of God in some of the psalms, like our experiences of an unsettled world.

Henry David Thoreau said of the oceanfront in Wellfleet that we can stand facing the surf and put all America behind us—a bit of an exaggeration, especially now that so many of us flock here, bringing America with us; but we do still feel the force of

nature. John Muir, Thoreau's disciple and the apostle of the American wilderness, made nature's wonders internal to us. In the passage Mary read, Muir says that the sun shines not on us but *in* us; the song of birds, of wind, of thunder is *our* song. To put it in another, more urban, way in the words of a song we may hear this evening,

What if God was one of us?
 Just a slob like one of us?
 Just a stranger on the bus
 Trying to make His way home?

And yeah, yeah, God is great
 Yeah, yeah, God is good¹

There's a rightness, there's an order, there's an intelligence in the creation, and we are beneficiaries of something we did not make but into which we are born. Not everyone, alas, shares this wealth the way we do. But it's the basis of our ideals, our aspirations, our hope.

Eva Miles and Bryce read us a passage from the scriptural love song, the Song of Solomon. At places this biblical book is a quite unabashedly erotic love song. Winter is over for the lovers in the Song, and it's time for love; it is spring. Love flashes like fire, "like a raging flame." The Jewish and Christian traditions have seen the Song as an allegory of God's love of us and (one hopes) our love in return.

And that brings me to the reason we are here today. For people in love there is an elation: as Shakespeare says, [My 'state' or soul] /Like to the lark at break of day arising/ From sullen earth, sings hymns at Heaven's gate."²

When we see two people in love—not puppy love, not mere flirtation, not just lust, sex-driven—when we see and know a couple truly in love, we recognize something akin to the rightness we see in the creation on a Cape Cod morning. Our spirits are lifted with the spirit of the lovers, and we feel better about our world. There is a joy, an elation about the time of a wedding that is transporting not only for the lovers but also for their friends and family. We know that the day of celebration is not normal times. There will be storms rolling across the placid bay: frictions at work,

disagreements at home, events that pull in contrary ways, and (of course) concerns about children and the workaday world. Though it takes effort, nevertheless, love can prevail; and the joy and rightness of a wedding day—of the love we see and celebrate—can endure despite the many and inevitable challenges love must face.

Lucinda read us the story about how Jesus changed water into wine at a wedding. We didn't hear that story just because many of us are so fond of wine—some of us have basements full. And it is not just because the setting of the story is a wedding. We hear that story today because it is about new beginnings. The bride and groom are behind the scenes, although their wedding party is threatened because there's no more wine. Jesus steps into the breach and turns water into wine—and not just plunk but far better wine than the wedding planners had originally provided. It is a sign that something new is happening.

Something new is happening. Nowadays people live together before they are married, before they even think about being married. So, you might ask, what's new? The newness, the difference is that a couple makes a decision to go public—to spend life together as long as they are both living. (Even in this peak moment of a lifetime, we recognize that life will end.) The difference in being married is that we make vows—serious, life-long promises—to live together, to support one another, to hang in through whatever difficulties confront us. Something new is happening, and it is—or should be and *can* be—as though tap water became a fine premier cru, old vintage, old world wine of indescribable worth.

And it's not just something new for George and Erica. It's something a little new for all of us, of course, that Erica and George are going to be a married couple. It's something *really* new for Laszlo, Bryce, Logan, Eva Miles, and Aurora. It's a new family. You still have your love of Ivan and Stephanie, of course, and you still have their love for you. It may not be easy at times to negotiate this new family, and you can tell me in a few years whether it is better to have three parents or two or one. (You can't deny, however, that it is a very great blessing to have more grandparents.) In a few moments, you five are going to present Erica and George to be married, and you are going to promise to support their marriage and your family

through all the complexities of living together until you eventually emerge as free agents—but still members of a family. And you—all seven of you in this new family—will not be alone, for all of us will also pledge our love and support for George and Erica and this family. It is for this purpose that Erica and George have asked a few of their friends to help them uphold their vows.

At this stage of my life I more often gratefully receive advice and support from my offspring than I give it, and so I desist today. Perhaps, if we want some advice, we can call again on William Shakespeare:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
 Admit impediments. Love is not love
 Which alters when it alteration finds,
 Or bends with the remover to remove:
 O no; it is an ever-fixed mark,
 That looks on tempests, and is never shaken;
 It is the star to every wandering bark,
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
 Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
 Within his bending sickle's compass come;
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
 If this be error and upon me proved,
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.³

¹ Eric Bazilian, "One of Us," a song made famous by Joan Osborne, who sang it at the reception.

² William Shakespeare, Sonnet 29.

³ Shakespeare, Sonnet 116.