

THE WEDDING AT CANA

John 2:1-11

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on January 20, 2019, the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.'

Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.'

Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum with his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they remained there for a few days.

I.

The wedding at Cana is one of those Biblical stories which, when people are beginning their seminary studies or preaching ministries, stands out in memory.

- For example, “turning water into wine” is one of those Biblical phrases – like “turning the other cheek,” “going the extra mile,” or “walking on water” – that emerge from Jesus’ life, encapsulate all he does, and describe ways in which we may stretch beyond our normal abilities or powers as we seek to live in his name. How many times in seeking a leader do we say to ourselves: “We are looking for someone who can walk on water”? How many times in hiring a colleague do we say: “I want someone who will go the extra mile”? These phrases align with the power Jesus shows in this passage in which he reveals who he is and what he can do.
- Some of us who serve in or are the product of Protestant denominations which have a history of stressing temperance and abstinence from alcohol will seek to distance ourselves from this heritage by pointing out that Jesus not only drank wine but turned water into it.
- Those of us who may feel a bit uneasy about the scope of our wedding plans as they draw near to the place that appears on no maps but lies just ahead known as “over the top” – or those of us in line to foot the bill for such weddings – can take some comfort from the fact that the first miracle Jesus performs in the Gospel of John occurs at a wedding feast that lasts seven days and doubtless costs more than a few shekels.

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But perhaps the most jarring aspect of the story we notice is the apparent tension between Jesus and his mother Mary.

Mary says: “They have no wine.”

Jesus says: “What concern is that to you and to me?”

She then looks at the servants, throws her hands in the air, and says: “Just do whatever he tells you.”

He then does exactly what his mother has hinted that he do and what he has appeared to refuse to do.

We have all been in family conversations like this: it is simply a bit comical and curious to see one break out between Jesus and his mother.

II.

It is precisely this exchange between Jesus and Mary on which I want to focus today, but in a way more serious than comical. I would like us to notice what Mary notices, why she turns to Jesus, how he reacts, and then how she reacts.

To follow the story closely:

- What Mary notices is a human need – not one of life or death, of poverty or plenty – but a situation in which a wedding feast has run out of wine.
- She turns to her son – whom both she and the reader know is the “the Word” that has become “flesh” and “dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” – and lays this situation at his feet.
- When Jesus responds to the situation with what appears to be rebuff or at least lack of concern, Mary does not respond to him directly but simply tells the servants who are present and watching: “Do whatever he tells you.”
- Mary then exits if not the scene, at least the dialogue within it.

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A scholar of the Gospel of John with whom I have studied and who recently passed away – Dr. Gail R. O’Day – equates Mary’s action with an event in the Old Testament.¹

You may recall that Joseph, the favored son of Jacob, is sold into slavery in Egypt. Through a talent he has for interpreting dreams, he comes to the attention of Pharaoh, the King of Egypt.

When the King has a dream of seven fat cows followed by seven emaciated cows, the King is troubled and sends for Joseph to interpret the dream.

Joseph interprets the dream as a warning that the Egyptians will have seven years of plenty (the fat cow) followed by seven years of famine (the emaciated cow).

¹ Gail O’Day, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995). Cited by Chandler Stokes in his paper on this passage at the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminary, 2019.

Pharaoh then asks Joseph to devise a program to store grain during the years of plenty so that nation will not *starve* during the years of famine.

Joseph obliges and becomes one of the most powerful people in Egypt.

When famine strikes, “all the land of Egypt...[cries] to Pharaoh for bread.” Pharaoh says to the Egyptians, “What [Joseph] says to you, do.”²

And just as Jesus turns water into wine, “Joseph [opens] all the storehouses...and all the world [comes] to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain.”³

The parallel is this: Just as Pharaoh does not know *how* to solve the famine, Mary does not know *how* to replenish wine. But each trusts the chosen one of God – Joseph and Jesus, respectively. Each turns the situation *over* to the one with power, backs away, and gives that one room to operate.

Though we may comically read Mary’s words to Jesus as nagging her nearly grown son, at a deeper level, she is actually placing tremendous trust in *who* he is, *what* he can do, and what *she* will be able to do in response. “Do *whatever* he tells you,” she says to the servants.

Hers is the “whatever” of *confidence*, not of *cynicism*.

III.

Mary’s action, akin to Pharaoh’s, leads me to ask:

Is it not the case that trusting God,
Calling a situation to God’s attention,
Placing a situation at God’s feet or in God’s hands,
And giving God time and space in which to act
Is a form of prayer?

Isn’t a major element of prayer
Our trust that God will indeed handle
In God’s own way a matter
We have brought to God’s attention?

If in prayer we entrust something to a God
Whom we believe or even want to believe
May notice, listen, see, care, act –
Isn’t that a form of prayer?

Mary’s words are words indeed words of prayer.

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I realize that I am not a person who preaches much about prayer.

² Genesis 41:55.

³ Genesis 41:56-57.

- The most meaningful aspects of my own prayer life are the thirty seconds following the Prayer of Confession, in which I try to clear my mind of everything that holds me back or distracts me so that I may be fully open to the spirit and present in the service of worship.
- In addition, when I stand with one of you in a home or hospital room, I try to give voice to what I think you would like God to notice, hear, receive, act upon. This, too, is a great privilege of prayer – to lay at the feet of God a human situation involving someone for whom we care.

On a more personal level, over the course of my life, I have laid at the feet of God situations which are beautiful or painful or both, situations I have expected to be long-term if not lifelong.

- If they are a gift, I have generally been able to say: This is a *gift* from God worth doing everything in my power to accept, receive, open, enjoy, use, develop.
- About less “gifted” matters, I have generally been able to say: This is a *tragedy* –
 - a scar like Odysseus’⁴
 - a limp like Jacob’s⁵
 - a speech impediment like Moses’⁶
 - a lament for her children like Rachel’s⁷
 - a bitterness like Naomi’s⁸
 - a thorn in the flesh like Paul’s⁹

which will always be a part of who I am, but which, in the sufficiency of God’s grace,¹⁰ will neither curse nor crush me, and from which, following Paul, I may come to know that “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, hope does not disappoint us...”¹¹

I seek to entrust both *gift* and *scar* to God. That for me is prayer. That for me is what Mary did in this early scene in the life of her son as together they attended the long and beautiful wedding at Cana in which the wine ran out. It is a story about prayer.

IV.

This weekend we remember the birth of perhaps one of the two or three most influential persons of Christian faith in American history. Among Martin Luther King’s most famous speeches was the one he delivered the night before his death to a packed house at the Mason Temple of the Church of God in Christ in Memphis. I had the privilege of visiting that Temple for the first time last March, sitting in its wooden theatre seats, listening to a handful of surviving sanitation workers – some of whom were still working – whose immediate needs had brought Dr. King to Memphis. On that night, he concluded his speech, saying:

It really doesn't matter what happens now. I left Atlanta this morning, and as we got started on the plane, there were six of us. The pilot said over the public address system, "We are sorry for the delay, but we

⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 19.

⁵ Genesis 32:22-32.

⁶ Exodus 4:10.

⁷ Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:18.

⁸ Ruth 1:19-21.

⁹ II Corinthians 12:7-10.

¹⁰ II Corinthians 12:8.

¹¹ Romans 5: 3-5.

have Dr. Martin Luther King on the plane. And to be sure that all of the bags were checked, and to be sure that nothing would be wrong on the plane, we had to check out everything carefully. And we've had the plane protected and guarded all night."

And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop.

And I don't mind.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

And so I'm happy, tonight.

I'm not worried about anything.

I'm not fearing any man!

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!¹²

Less than 24 hours later, he lay felled on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

Entrusting 300 years of the scourge of racial slavery to the Lord. Entrusting his own life to the Lord. "I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory..."
Prayer.

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This week also brought the quiet death of a poet named Mary Oliver, widely read by Presbyterian clergy and read by many of you. Throughout her 83 years, she was known as a "nature poet," and in several poems she had profound things to say about prayer.

Is prayer a gift, or a petition,
or does it matter?¹³

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.¹⁴

¹² Martin Luther King, Jr. "I've Been to the Mountaintop," April 3, 1968, available at <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>.

¹³ Mary Oliver, "I Happened to be Standing," available at <http://www.homesongblog.com/spring/i-happened-to-be-standing-a-poem-about-prayer-by-mary-oliver/>.

¹⁴ Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," available at <https://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/133.html>.

In a poem entitled “Praying,” she wrote:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.”¹⁵

“Do whatever he tells you,”
Said Mary the Mother of Jesus said.
When she had “paid attention.”
Then she grew silent.

Soon, another voice began to speak:
“Fill the jars with water.”

¹⁵ Mary Oliver, “Praying,” available at <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/414333-praying-it-doesn-t-have-to-be-the-blue-iris-it>.