

“Mary’s Greatest Gift to Every Parent”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: Psalm 36:5-10

John 2:1-11

“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.’”

- John 2:3-5

Prayer

Spirit of the Living God fall afresh on us.

Quiet all the thoughts that distract us from your Word

And prepare our hearts to receive the Good News of the Gospel.

In Christ and through Christ we make this prayer. Amen.

At least once every three years, the cycle of Scripture lessons set up by the Revised Common Lectionary takes us to a wedding in Cana where Jesus turns water into wine. The Church tells us that this is an epiphany moment. With John the evangelist, the lectionary hopes that you and I can see in the abundance of good wine in today’s lesson a sign that Jesus is bringing something new and exciting and joyful and life-transforming to humankind. The miracle at Cana sets the stage for Jesus’ public ministry and reveals that, through Christ, God bursts into the ordinary moments of our lives with the gift of abundant grace, the delight of fresh possibilities, and the promise of extravagant generosity beyond our imagining. The astonishing quantity of wine that Jesus provides for the wedding party, somewhere between 120 and 180 gallons, may sound excessive and even wasteful, but this overwhelming amount of the finest wine is a sign of the nature of Jesus’ own ministry. The writer of the fourth Gospel says that Jesus came so that we might have life and have it abundantly.¹ John also wrote in the prologue of his Gospel that Jesus, God’ Word-in-human-flesh, fills our hearts to the brim with God’s love and, from his fullness, we all receive grace upon grace.²

Poet Richard Wilbur captured what’s at the heart of this epiphany story in the poem entitled “*A Wedding Toast*” that he wrote at the occasion of his oldest son’s own wedding.

***“St. John tells how, at Cana's wedding feast,
The water-pots poured wine in such amount
That by his sober count
There were a hundred gallons at the least.*”**

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

***It made no earthly sense, unless to show
How whatsoever love elects to bless
Brimms to a sweet excess
That can without depletion overflow.”³***

It is this sweet excess of God’s grace and unceasing love that overflows in the Church Universal and makes us aware of God’s endless capacity to surprise us with goodness, to gladden our hearts even in times of troubling lack of hope, to fill our lives with the richness of faith that makes no earthly sense, and to equip us to live each day with the assurance that there is no need, no sin, no circumstance in our lives that can deplete God’s power to save us from living with the constant fear that we might not have enough or be enough. The miracle at Cana, that sweet excess that continues without depletion to overflow in the Church, carries an important message for us who are gathered this morning – especially in these days when the decisions of our public health experts, of school districts and even of our own church to deal with the Omicron variant place our focus on what is missing, what is incomplete, what we dislike, what is inadequate and devoid of joy, the story of the abundance of wine challenges us to believe that despite everything we know that is not quite right or good in our lives right now, a new day is still dawning. We are not out of hope. We are not out of peace. We are not completely out of gladness. We have not run out of solidarity. We are not out of steam to love one another. We are not out of faith in God because we know that in Christ God has chosen to bless us with sacred stories that still gives us a vision of what the Church and the world could be like if we did live with that same imaginative faith of Mary.

The fourth Gospel only mentions Mary twice, but never by name. She is referred to as “***the mother of Jesus***” and, on Jesus’ own lips, Mary is always addressed as “***woman***” rather than “mother.” John grants Mary two brief cameo appearances in his Gospel: one here at the wedding feast in Cana at the beginning of her son’s public ministry and another at the foot of the cross where she watches helplessly the eldest of her children suffer and die.⁴ But we already know Mary’s life story. We know what kind of woman Mary is. She is the same young girl who received a visit from Gabriel and dared to interrogate the archangel before she said the words that changed her life and the world, “***Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.***”⁵ This is the same woman who gave birth to her first child in a stable and treasured in her heart the amazing story the shepherds recounted of choirs of angels announcing the birth of the Messiah and Savior.⁶ This is still the same mother who welcomed wise men from the East into her humble home and escaped to Egypt with Joseph to protect the life of her son.⁷ This is the same Mary who found her teenage son in the Temple debating with the teachers.⁸ For 30 years, Mary had watched Jesus grow up and increase in wisdom⁹ and Mary undoubtedly instilled in Jesus the same audacious faith and love of Scriptures that made her believe that she could give birth to the Son of God.¹⁰ When Mary noticed that the wine was running out at the wedding, she saw in that ordinary and worrisome moment a unique opportunity for Jesus to claim his

identity as the Messiah. She knew well the language of the Hebrew prophets who spoke of the messianic age as a time of abundance when God would restore the fortunes of Israel and the people would once again build homes and live in them, plant vineyards and drink wine and the mountains would drip with sweet wine and all the hills would flow with it.¹¹ While the wedding guests were still celebrating, eating and drinking, Mary approached her son with a proposal that was almost as daring as the one Gabriel offered her. “**They have no wine,**” she told her son and Jesus knew exactly what Mary had in mind.

Providing new wine would be the perfect sign of the arrival of a new day for God’s people. Mary knew in her heart that it was not only the bride and groom and the wedding guests who desperately needed more wine to keep the party going; she believed that the whole world needed to taste the sweetness of God’s blessings and experience the transformative power of God’s unfaltering love through the ministry of her son to enjoy a life of abundant hope, peace and joy.

Oddly, Jesus resists his mother’s gentle and yet unsubtle nudge to take the first step into his public ministry. “**Woman,**” he talks to Mary respectfully but with a degree of disengagement, “**what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.**” No one knows what Jesus meant by his answer. Perhaps he had a different plan in mind. Maybe he did not want to be known as the purveyor of an absurd amount of wine for a wedding party. Perhaps Jesus thought that in a world where there is so much need, where people are hungry and sick and living in abject poverty, he could have a much bigger impact if his first miracle were the multiplication of bread or the healing of a diseased human being. Mary however believes that it does matter that her son’s first miracle will take place in a moment of deep human joy rather than in a time of heartbreaking sorrow. Like all loving mothers, Mary wants her child to find deep gladness in his own life and in the choices he will make as an adult. Her maternal instinct tells her that to face the world’s deepest needs, her son will have to know how to avoid being cornered by despair and hopelessness. He will have to live with a profound gratitude for the goodness of the world God created. Mary also wants Jesus to be open to this wild possibility that in the abundance of new wine, his disciples and those who would follow him later might find life-giving spiritual joy in knowing that our God is the God of fullness, the God who makes the incomplete whole, the weak strong, the impossible possible. So rather than walking away from her reluctant son, Mary gives him a chance to open up his mind, to think about her proposal once again, to seize the day and embrace his calling to be the Christ. She takes action. Mary instructs the servants to do whatever her son tells them. She acts as a catalyst to embolden Jesus to show himself to the servants, the disciples and to the whole human race. And the result is precisely what Mary had imagined, John says, “**Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.**”

It is fascinating to see in today's Gospel reading how Mary's faith empowers Jesus to become the human being and the Messiah he was meant to be.

Just the other day, I was watching an old interview on YouTube where Fred Rogers, I mean THE Mr. Rogers, said to Charlie Rose that one of the greatest gifts an adult can give to a child is to love what they do in front of their children. During the interview, Mr. Rogers shared a story about a sculptor in the nursery school where he was working when he was getting his master's degree in child development. He said that the man would come every week to sculpt in front of the kids and the nursery school director told him, "***I don't want you to teach sculpting, I just want you to do what you do and love it in front of the children.***" Fred Rogers told Charlie Rose that in that year, clay was never used more imaginatively before or after that time. Then Mr. Rogers made a comment that I won't forget because of its simplicity and unassailable truth. He said that we have to let children catch the attitude that is good, hopeful, faithful, loving, kind, and generous, because in his own brilliant words, "***attitudes are caught, not taught.***"¹²

Last year, the world lost Desmond Tutu, the South African theologian, priest, Christian, man of deep faith, and human rights activist who helped to bring down apartheid and became the chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the leading voice for peaceful reconciliation between Blacks and Whites in South Africa under Black majority rule. Like hundreds of other Black children in the 1930's, Tutu grew up poor in a slum, which later was demolished to make way for a whites-only suburb near Johannesburg. His father was a teacher and his mother worked as a domestic help for white families. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate whose faith and joy were contagious said repeatedly during his lifetime that the most influential person in his life was an Oxford-educated white priest named Trevor Huddleston who ministered to the people living in the shantytowns and at the margin of South African society. Tutu remembered Huddleston as the first white man he ever saw lifting his hat to greet his mother. At a time when his father, a Black educator, was constantly harassed by white teenagers and his mother was seeing as a second-class human being, this simple gesture had a profound impact on the 9-year-old and changed the course of Tutu's life. When Desmond Tutu came down with tuberculosis at the age of 14, Huddleston once again surprised him with his kindness, faith and generosity. Huddleston visited Tutu frequently bringing him books and sharing with Tutu the passion with which he opposed Apartheid. South Africa, the Church, and the world are a much more hopeful place because Tutu caught Huddleston's love and attitude and stood up for the excess sweetness of justice that flows without depletion from the teachings, birth, life, faith and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Desmond Tutu left this bit of wisdom for the Church, "***Do your little bit of good where you are; it is those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.***"¹³ I think what Tutu was saying is that we have to spend more time doing the

good things we love and let, not only our kids but other adults too, see and catch our Christian attitude.

Mary did not just talk to Jesus about her faith. She did not merely read the biblical stories to Jesus hoping that the stories by themselves would make her human son into the Messiah. Mary gave Jesus a taste of her own defiant faith. She kept living out her faith in a God of wasteful and lavish generosity in front of Jesus until Jesus, the Son of God, trusting in her wisdom, took that first step toward his mission and turned water into wine at Cana. Mary did her little bit of good by raising Jesus to be the Christ of our faith. She knew she could not show him how to be a Savior, so Mary loved God in front of Jesus and hoped that he would remember the kind of human being she was and how she lived as a woman of faith, as his very human mother, and that her attitude would inspire Jesus to live into his life calling with unabated faith in the fullness of God's goodness and love.

This epiphany passage we read this morning is about the beginning of Jesus' public ministry and the in-breaking of God's Kingdom through the mission of Christ, but this text also contains Mary's greatest gift to the parents in our congregation. In the words of Mr. Rogers, Mary reminds us that attitudes are not taught; they are caught. If you want your children to love the church, then you have to love the church in front of them. If you want your kids to follow Christ, then you have to follow Christ in front of them. If you hope that your children will grow up to be human beings who will do a little bit of good to end racial discrimination, to protect the environment, and to make our world more just, peaceful and hopeful then live a life committed to racial justice, show them that you care about the Earth and do what you can to make the world a place of abundant human solidarity and persistent hope. Let your children and the people around you catch your attitude!

Martin Luther King Jr., whose life, Christian ministry and attitude we celebrate this weekend, preached a sermon two months before his assassination in which he told his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church how he would like to be remembered after his death. Rev. Martin Luther King said, "***when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long... Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize... three or four hundred other awards—that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.***

I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others.

I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody...

I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry.

And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked.

I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison.

I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. And that's all I want to say."¹⁴

Friends, may Christ our Lord inspire us to live a committed life in this New Year. May mother Mary's faith encourage us to live our love for Christ's teachings and our faith in God in front of our children. May you and I find the strength within us to catch the attitudes of faithful Christians like Martin Luther King Jr. and Desmond Tutu so we can do our little bit of good to overwhelm the world with the sweet excess of God's saving grace revealed in Jesus Christ.

And let the whole church say: Amen!

¹ John 10:10.

² John 1:16.

³ Richard Wilbur in A Wedding Toast, published in "Collected Poems 1943-2004," p. 136.

⁴ See John 19:25-27.

⁵ Luke 1:36.

⁶ Luke 2:19.

⁷ Matthew 2:1-15.

⁸ Luke 2:41-51.

⁹ Luke 2:52.

¹⁰ Luke 1:35.

¹¹ Amos 9:11-14.

¹² Charlie Rose in Remembering Mr. Rogers (1194/1997), [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djoyd46TVVc>].

¹³ Quoted by Rosalind Brown, Malcolm Guite, and Jane Williams in Reflections for Sundays: Year A, p. 196.

¹⁴ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in A Drum Major, a sermon given on 4th of February 1968.