



“Mother Church”

Scripture – John 2:1-11

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, January 20, 2019

There was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the *mother* of Jesus was there.

Jesus attended too, of course, as did his disciples. But I get the sense that this is *Mary’s* thing. Perhaps it is the wedding of her best friend’s son — the one who grew up calling her Auntie Mary and spent countless afternoons trailing Jesus around while their mothers visited over tea. Mary has promised to help her friend with this wedding ... arranging the flowers and picking up extra bags of ice and making sure the linens are in order. And she has convinced Jesus to join them for the festivities. I can imagine their conversation: “Jesus — you’ve known Jesse since you were boys. The wedding will last a week; you can make it for a day or two.”

So here they are — at this wedding in Cana. The party’s been hoppin’ for a few days now. The guests are feeling merry, to say the least. Mary’s best friend has finally relaxed, seeing how happy her son and his new bride are with the festivities. The dance floor is packed, and no one seems to care — or even notice — that the band has played “YMCA” three times in a row.

Everything is going well, until Mary wanders past the bar and notices servants frantically searching the cabinets. “Where’s the rest of the wine?” one whispers. “There isn’t any,” the other concludes. “We’re even out of the boxed stuff.”

Anyone who has ever planned a wedding knows that — at some point — there will be a crisis. For the wedding at Cana, *this* is that moment. But this crisis is more significant than the bride misplacing her veil, or Uncle Steve making a scene during cocktail hour, or the wedding planner needing to move the ceremony indoors because of rain. In first century Palestine, a shortage of wine was seen as a failure of hospitality that would bring shame on the wedding hosts.¹ The bride and groom would become the laughingstock of Cana, their marriage beginning under a cloud of embarrassment. Auntie Mary couldn’t let that happen to her best friend’s beloved son.

So she calls Jesus over. “They have no wine,” she says.

I wonder what Mary had observed in her son that made her so confident Jesus could resolve this crisis. The Gospel of John reveals nothing of Jesus’ upbringing. It barely even mentions Mary; she appears only twice in the entire Gospel — here, at the wedding in Cana, and again at the foot of the cross. John doesn’t even call her by name; she is simply “the mother of Jesus.”

¹ Lindsey Trozzo, “Commentary on John 2:1-11,” www.workingpreacher.org

So we are left to wonder: What gifts had the mother of Jesus seen in her child that led her to believe a miracle was possible? Had Mary peeked around the corner into the next room when Jesus was a boy, just in time to see him healing his little brother's skinned knee? Did she walk into the pantry to find an adolescent Jesus multiplying loaves of bread so there would be enough to satisfy the voracious appetite of a teenage boy? Has Mary been encouraging her son to use these gifts, knowing that they will be a blessing to others? Has she grown impatient waiting for him to find the right moment to reveal his glory to the world?

Whatever the case — with the wine cellar empty and the bride and groom's reputation on the line, this must seem to Mary as good a moment as any. "They have no wine," Mary tells her son.

But Jesus is not eager to act. "What concern is that to you and to me?" he replies. "My hour has not yet come."

I imagine Mary raising her eyebrows and shooting him a look that could only mean one thing: "I'm your mother and you'll do as I say." You might know this expression; it is a trademark of mothers everywhere. And, in this moment, it seems to have its intended effect. With a sigh and a shrug, Jesus acquiesces. He may be the Savior of the world, but he still knows when it's best to listen to his mama.

With that Mary instructs the servants — "Do whatever he tells you" — and walks away, leaving her son to work wonders.

We know the rest of the story: Jesus commands the servants to fill six enormous jugs with water, then effortlessly turns some hundred fifty gallons into wine. And not just any wine — the finest wine. Wine so delicious that it astonishes the chief steward, who can't believe the bridegroom has saved the good stuff until now. Catastrophe averted. There is plenty of wine to go around. So much, in fact, that the servants start filling jars and jugs and sending it home with guests. Their very own bottles of grace. Now, the community will remember this wedding as a feast of abundance, where all drank their fill and were satisfied.

And the mother of Jesus may well remember this wedding with pride, as the first time her son revealed his gifts in all their fullness ... The first time Mary's community saw what she had seen in him: a man whose signs and wonders would bless others with abundant grace — grace that cannot be measured or explained, only enjoyed.

I am not convinced that Jesus would have performed the first of his signs at the wedding in Cana had it not been for his mother's urging. If Mary had not called upon her son to act, the wine jars would have stayed empty. The guests would have left early, grumbling the entire way home about their stingy hosts. The party would have been a disaster. The bride and groom, devastated and shamed.

But the mother of Jesus knew her son had gifts that would bless this community — that would turn this wedding from a scene of scarcity to a feast of abundance. So she urged Jesus to act. And grace flowed.

You see, I believe parents are often at their best when they call out the gifts of their children. Gifts that they have seen with their own eyes and that they want the world to see, too. Not as a point of pride, but because they know that their son's gentle compassion or their daughter's generosity and grace will bless others. They know their children's gifts will bring joy to the community, even as Jesus' simple miracle brought delight to the wedding guests in Cana.

I like to think that John left Mary's name out of the Gospel intentionally. That this was not an oversight, but an invitation ... an invitation to read the "mother of Jesus" as every mother. The mothers who gave us life, and the ones who stepped in to make life sweet when our own mothers were not up to the task. The mothers — both women *and* men — who taught us right from wrong, and nurtured within us a love for the wider community, who

guided us toward life-giving choices, and encouraged us to use our gifts in service to others. The mother of Jesus represents *every* mother who calls out the gifts of her children ... including Mother Church.

Including Mother Church.

I am grateful to my friend and colleague, the Reverend Casey Thompson, for introducing me to the image of Mother Church and its resonance with this passage from John.² It is such a fitting image. For the church is the body that forms us. When she is at her best, Mother Church is the one who teaches us right from wrong, and who nurtures within us a faith that sustains and satisfies; who guides us in the way of Christ, and who encourages us to use our gifts in service to others.

No, she is not our parent. She is not intended to replace our parents. But Mother Church has a special role to play in calling out the gifts of her children. In reminding each and every one of us that the Spirit has given us gifts to use for the common good, so that —together — we might bless the world. So that — as the body of Christ — we might point others toward the abundant grace of God, just as Jesus does at that wedding in Cana.

We must remember that we are Mother Church, and this role is both our gift and our charge. There is no point in our shared ministry when this calling is more clear than when we celebrate a baptism. Every time we respond to the question — “Will we guide, nurture, and encourage this disciple to be a faithful follower of Christ?” — we embrace our identity as Mother Church. For we promise right then and there to form God’s children — *our* children — and to help them live their lives in service to Christ. We pledge to teach little Jack God’s insistence on justice, and to guide Roger to act with kindness, and to encourage Carol to use her gifts in service to others. At her best, Mother Church calls out the gifts of her children so that they will bless the world.

Whenever the people of Idlewild Presbyterian Church in Memphis celebrate a baptism, they ask questions of the children of their church (just as we do here).

*Do you promise to be a friend to little Helen?
If she needs directions, will you show her the way?
If she falls down, will you help pick her up?
Will you play with her, and share with her the stories of Jesus?*

As the Reverend Anne Apple — one of the pastors of that congregation — reflects, “These questions form our children and our congregation for service with one another and for the world.” Here’s one way she has seen this at work:

Years ago a teenager in their congregation was lost in the grip of mental illness; she felt she had nothing left to offer and she had lost all hope of finding kindness in this world. So she attempted to take her own life. Thankfully, she was not successful.

A decade later, she was in a profoundly better place, and was preparing to serve on the session of Idlewild Presbyterian Church. It is the custom of that congregation that — when you become an Elder — you tell your faith story to those joining the session with you. As part of her testimony, that young woman said this: “After a horrible time in my life, recovering at home with my mother, a plate of brownies appeared on our doorstep. They were covered in foil with a crayoned note scotched-tape to the top. All that note said was, ‘If she falls down, will you help pick her up?’” She ended her testimony by sharing how that one family was the first to call and ask her to baby-sit and care for their children — for those same little boys who had written out that baptismal question

² The Rev. Casey Thompson, “Mama Said.” Sermon delivered at Wayne Presbyterian Church (Wayne, PA) on January 17, 2016, www.waynepres.org.

and taped it to the plate of brownies. That family was the first to trust this teenager, the first to affirm that she had something to offer the world.

This family lived out the promises Mother Church had made to this teenager at her baptism. They recognized she had gifts to share, and called upon her to use them. And, as this young woman began to heal, Mother Church recognized in her other gifts: She became a teacher of children, a leader in the church, and an empathetic presence for others struggling through challenging times in their own lives. This woman now uses her Spirit-given gifts to bless others within and beyond her community, and to point others toward the abundant grace of God. At her best, Mother Church calls out the gifts of her children so that they will bless the world.³

You and I, we are Mother Church. And it is our calling to form one another in the faith. To teach children young and old about the God who loves us and asks us to love in return. To nurture the gifts with which we are blessed, and to encourage one another to use those Spirit-given gifts in service to others. To call out the gifts of each other, just as Mary does. And, we just might be surprised how the Spirit uses us to turn hopeless situations into feasts of delight, into fountains of grace that bless the world.

³ The Rev. Anne H. K. Apple, “Baptism.” From the *Confirmation for the Rest of Us* series, published by Wayne Presbyterian Church (Wayne, PA), www.waynepres.org.