

A sermon preached at Grace Church, Russell Road in Alexandria, VA on January 20, 2019.
The 2nd Sunday after Epiphany: Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I usually warn couples during marriage preparation that things can go wrong on their wedding day.

It may be unfortunate, like the person responsible for distributing the service bulletins to wedding guests beforehand suddenly takes ill so nothing was handed out, leaving everyone there (except for the priest and their spouse) with little to no idea as to how or even when to respond during the service.

It might be something that few, if any, notice such as a diamond chip falling out of the groom's ring that is found by the Altar Guild just as those outward and visible symbols of vows exchanged are prayed over and blessed (that was Chrissie's and my wedding thirty-eight years ago with our initial wedding bands). Thank you, Grace Church Altar Guild!

Or perhaps it is something all too obvious as when weather intrudes upon an outdoor wedding venue. The service had concluded and no sooner than the bridal party and I had processed out of the outdoor chapel and were under cover, the skies opened, unleashing a deluge, leaving wedding guests tossing chairs about and scrambling for cover!

But weddings are fun. I love doing weddings because the occasions are so joyous and because I truly value the sacrament of Holy Matrimony. Yes, couples may be stressed, but by the time the reception begins, they are finally married and have moved beyond all the details into that sweet “whatever will happen, will happen” kind of mindset.

And what do they care? They're married and are kissing every time someone clinks a glass! The wedding planner however, whether paid or some really organized friend, still has lots of other things to worry about as the reception unfolds. How's the food going to turn out? Will the servers circulate or just stand around? Did the DJ get the first song, right? Will everyone be able to hear the toasts? When should they cut the cake? No, the wedding planner doesn't relax until well after the happy-couple departs for their honeymoon. You couldn't pay me to be a wedding planner!

When I read the gospel we heard today, I wonder if Jesus' mother -- oh, and the way --, notice that this gospel never names her as Mary -- was the wedding planner. She seems to be very concerned about the details of this wedding feast.

According to customs during Jesus' time, wedding festivities would begin on the third day of the week and last for seven days. Can you imagine? I've seen plenty of weddings where crazy amounts of time and money are spent on a celebration that lasts 3-4, maybe even 6, hours! But can you imagine ~ 7 Days!

At this wedding celebration in Cana, guests would have been eating on floor mats and, in the course of the 7-day celebration; they would consume large quantities of food and wine. There was likely music and lively dancing. People made the most of these celebrations, and if anything cut the festivities short, everyone would have been quite disappointed.

This is where we enter the story unfolding at this wedding in Cana. The text tells us it is the third day, which means it is the first day of the wedding celebration.

The music has started, the dancing has begun, guests are spread out on the floors enjoying the food and evidently really enjoying the beverages.

But something has gone horribly wrong. Either too many family members and guests showed up or else someone really overestimated the contents of their wine cellar. Somehow it is Jesus' mother who discovers that, in the course of the festivities, the hosts have run out of wine.

She may have realized this will cause the happy couple and their families' considerable embarrassment. She may even fear it will be the thing that haunts them at every family gathering for the foreseeable future; it could become the running punch line for every future wedding ever planned. It might be that thing that never goes away. Don't all families have them? It concerns her greatly for this young, newly married couple. What a way to start a life together, with shame hanging over their heads! She just cannot stand the idea of it. Perhaps knowing a thing or two about rumor mills and young brides, the mother of Jesus must do something to spare this couple that experience.

Just then Jesus and his new disciples come walking off the dance floor looking for something to drink. (Yes, I think Jesus knew how to party!)

"They have no wine," she says. These are her first words in the Gospel according to John and they sound like a mother speaking to her adult son. Is it a whisper, or is there is a tone in her voice clearly communicating, 'What are YOU going to do about this?' Jesus protests, but he knows, and she knows he has already lost this argument. "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." Yet unfazed by his response, she turns to the servants and says, "Do whatever he tells you."

I recognize this. In this, I hear my own mother. What self-respecting son could possibly say No to his mother. Not me. Not usually, anyway!

I think we appreciate this story for many reasons. If you dabble in the internet, you've probably seen the image of a store, where the aisle sign says Water, but there are clearly bottles of wine on the shelves, and the message is, "Jesus was here!" It's a good chuckle, I know. But the author of John uses this story to introduce Jesus, the living Word of God, to his readers. In the Gospel of John, there is no birth narrative to give us a back story. It begins with a deep theological conversation and Jesus' baptism. And then he goes to a wedding.

In this story, Jesus doesn't seem ready to start his ministry, but his mother knows better. She knows from where he came and for what he was sent. She knows and like all good mothers she encourages – might we say she prods her child to finally live up to his potential. Last week, for those of us who were here on a snowy Sunday, Fr. Malm noted that Luke tells us Jesus was about 30 years of age when he began his earthly ministry. Maybe Mary thought it was high time that Jesus got busy? And Jesus does.

His first miracle, or sign as John calls them, is not an act of physical healing. It isn't a stroll on top of a lake. Jesus turns water intended for purification into a lot of wine, and not the cheap stuff, but the best stuff there is. In this act he reveals the abundance of God's grace, and in doing so, begins to reveal his glory to those who will see and his disciples who come believe in him.

This happens because the mother of Jesus cannot stand by and watch an error in judgment leading to disgrace; she does not want their marriage celebration to have a lasting shame as its memory. And in response to her compassion for them, Jesus does what Mary asks.

Yes, it is time! In fact -- to borrow another part of Fr. Malm's sermon from last week, -- it is God's Perfect Time!

Jesus was able to work out the abundant grace of God in that moment because someone else helped him to see it was time. Sometimes we all need someone else to help us see it is time to do our part, to be an agent of God's grace at work in the world.

An online commentary I read this week by Nancy Rockwell, a retired UCC minister, yoked this gospel to a civil rights leader and martyr that we remember this weekend. Rockwell wrote, “Based on her need to stand against humiliation, the interchange between Mary and Jesus resembles the interchange between Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr, on an ordinary day in Montgomery. By refusing to give up her seat on the bus, or give in to one more instance of the humiliation of her people, Parks provoked a moment in history, and she provoked King’s entry into that moment...”¹

Rosa Parks helped Dr. King to see that it was time for him to work in a more organized way towards God’s vision for humanity. Yes, it was time! God’s Perfect Time!

We, too, are being called, my friends. It’s our time! God’s Perfect Time!

Just as the mother of Jesus looked at him and said, “They have no wine,” Christ is looking to us, saying to us, 'It's Time! Get to work.' The needs are many. Our world is hurting on so many fronts in all too many ways; too many people are at risk of being humiliated by inequities and outright injustice. In our nation, MLK outlined problems 50 years ago that have not gone away, despite some progress. These are not just things that go wrong at weddings. These issues are forming the fabric of our own future. The world is crying out for the abundant grace of God. How will we work through the humble offerings of our Time and Talent to provide the best thing that is needed?

Today, we review(ed) the annual budget proposed for 2019 for the mission and ministry of this parish. Next week at the Annual Meeting, we’ll celebrate past choices and decisions while celebrating the workers in our vineyard here in Alexandria and beyond!

But sometimes, we just need someone to tell us that it’s time.

So, my friends, I’m here to tell you that it’s time. God’s Perfect Time! Hearing Mary, seeing Jesus, remembering Rosa Parks, and giving thanks for The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ... It's Time! What are you – what are we -- going to do next?

AMEN.

¹ "Cana - an Unexpected Time," Bite in the Apple, 2013.