

“Woman!”

Jesus and his mother

A Lent Sermon by Rev. Dr. Dawn Jeffers Ramstad

John 2:1-12

As we go through this Lent this year, in Sunday worship we travel through John's gospel with Jesus and meet five different people along his journey to the cross. As his disciple, John knew Jesus well, witnessed some of what he reported personally, and seems to be aware of the other gospels as he witnesses to why he believes Jesus is the Christ. For example, Luke told us about Mary giving birth to Jesus, but John does not. John doesn't even tell us her name! But in John's gospel Mary witnessed both the beginning of Jesus' ministry and death. (John 19)

What I have been trying to get my imagination around is the whole idea that Jesus' mother expected him not only to attend a wedding, but to save the host from embarrassment. I caught this idea like a virus one just can't shake from Mark Lowry, Christian comedian and lyricist of the song “Mary, Did You Know?” Lowry has joked often about how his life with attention deficit disorder helps him see the world just a little differently from the rest of us, including the mother-son relationship Jesus and Mary share. On his DVD *Mark Lowry on Broadway*,ⁱ he does a great monolog covering how young Mary was when Jesus was born, imagining them growing up together, Jesus as a young child on her lap asking for a bedtime story, the day she lost God's when he was twelve years old (Luke 2: 41-52, and the great silence between that day and the miracle in today's scripture reading. Lowry wondered at length if in those eighteen or so years of silence if Mary already knew Jesus could perform miracles because he had been performing them around her house for years with no one taking notes for our future curiosity.

According to John, this mother-son conversation that led to Jesus' first public miracle occurred three days after his baptism. Jesus has begun his public ministry. He has already called disciples to go with him. Still, there was a wedding he must attend with Mary. Weddings then often took a whole week of celebration—bridal shower, bachelor party, ceremony, and reception all rolled up in one! Lots of wine for lots of guests was important for good hospitality, but their hosts ran out of wine. Mary said to Jesus, “They've run out of wine.” Nothing more.



I don't know how it is in your family, but it seems the Lowry family and the Ramstad family have a lot in common. If I were at a party with either of my sons and I said to them, "They've run out of coffee" my sons would make coffee. Now. Without arguing. With only one question, "Regular or decaf?" Likewise, if Lowry's Southern Baptist mama said to him, "They're out of Diet Coke," he wouldn't imagine she wanted him to water into Diet Coke. He'd assume she meant he should go and get more Diet Coke.

So then if you are either a son or a mother, wouldn't you think when Mary said to Jesus "They've run out of wine," she also meant "Do something about it" Then Jesus said something my sons might think of saying but wouldn't dare let out of their mouths. "Woman! Not now. It's not our problem."

Mary ignored him and told the servants, "Do what he says."

Jesus gave in to Mary. He ordered the servants to fill the large urns used for ritual bathing with water all the way to the brim. He had them draw some wine out of the urns to bring to the sommelier to taste. It wasn't just good wine; it was excellent wine! Jesus' first miracle came about at his mother's insistence.

In his retelling, Mark Lowry concludes, "I love the fact that Jesus' first miracle wasn't raising anyone from the dead. His first miracle wasn't giving sight to the blind. His first miracle was turning water into wine. His first miracle was one just to keep the party going."

Lowry's monolog is a great retelling of Jesus and Mary's life together, but is it just a comedy routine or is there a deeper something here for us today?

When our worship team and I decided to substitute this miracle story from John's gospel for the normal Gospel reading for today from Matthew, we made a choice to put a miracle story in place of an account of Jesus being tempted to sin by Satan. From the beginnings of the liturgical cycle as a Christian practice, the first Sunday of Lent focuses on Jesus choosing to reject sin as an example we should imitate. We are challenged to examine our own lives for our own ongoing sins. If you are using *The Disciplines* this year, it is the focus of our reading for today.

But we chose John and the first miracle for our worship today. In his gospel, John always focused on Jesus as the Christ and seems to assume his readers have access to other gospels. Therefore, John omitted Jesus' very human temptation to sin while fasting before beginning his ministry. What this first miracle story shares with the temptation stories is that Jesus made a choice.

So, where is sin in the water into wine story? None of the Ten Commandments were broken. The host failed to provide adequately for the guests, but is that a sin? What about

Mary? She meddled in their business. She ignored Jesus when he first replied to “They’re out of wine” with “Not now!” Mary was behaving badly, but was she sinning?

Jesus chose to meet Mary’s demand to help their hosts. He could have chosen to do nothing. He could have decided the hosts needed to feel the consequences of their bad planning. He could have ignored Mary just like she had ignored him rather than following by telling the servants to fill the large urns with water. He could have turned his back on the whole thing.

But he didn’t.

Jesus chose “. . . to keep the party going.” (Lowry)ⁱⁱ He chose to redeem their hosts and satisfy his mother’s demand. We may never fully understand his motive, but if we know Christ at all through John’s writings we can assume he was motivated by love—a love of his mother, a love of his hosts, a love for the bride and groom coupled with a desire to bless them with a memorable wedding. Because Jesus loved people, he chose grace and kept the party going!

Have you ever experienced Christ acting in your life when you have failed in your planning? Have you ever known answered prayer because you kept demanding Christ answer? Have you ever been part of a miracle by doing what you were told to do, the way the servants were? I hope you could say yes to at least one of these questions because the grace Jesus showed that day is a grace Christ wants you to be part of today.

Sinning is part of being human. In his novel *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis puts some coaching by one of Satan’s helpers like this, “Temptation will not work if you begin with the big sin. No one will get up in the morning and decide to commit mass murder as their first sin without a series of other sins leading to that day. But you can tempt them first with little sins. Meddling in another’s business. Telling others what they need to do. Judging the person seated next to you in the pew by the clothes they wore to church.”ⁱⁱⁱ Or as Jesus preached, “Why do you see the splinter that’s in your brother’s or sister’s eye, but don’t notice the log in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3)^{iv} Humans have degrees of sin, but for Christ sin is sin.

It is hard to imagine Mary being petty. It’s even harder to realize such pettiness could be sinful, but it is. It was not bigger than the first sin, a bite of fruit. (Gen. 3) Maybe Mary couldn’t help herself! More likely she could. We will never know, Mary is only one person in John’s bigger story of Jesus the Christ, our Redeemer whose first miracle was turning water into wine.

If I am honest with myself, in this story I have more in common with Mary than anyone else. My sins aren’t big by human standards, but they are sins that Christ is willing to cancel. Your personal sin doesn’t have to be huge, it is also an area of your life where you just are not your best self, Sin is everything that keeps you from being all God created you to be.

We are invited to keep Lent by choosing an area of discipline that will help us travel with Christ through our life as it is now. In our home we are doing a variation of fasting that focuses on two habits we need to improve to remain healthy as we age. The focus is on improving our self-discipline, of being good stewards of the very life we have been given.

That description of our practice is vague on purpose. You are not invited to keep Lent to be like John and me. We are all invited to keep Lent by focusing on how Christ can transform us. We all have areas of life where we know we are out of line with who we are called to be as Christians. The proper name for that is sin. In the idea of grace being greater than law, it isn't a matter of whose sin is greater and whose sin is lesser. Not at all. It is a matter of allowing Christ set your life as it is right by walking with him and allowing yourself to be changed, just like he turned the water into wine.

We chose the hymn selected to follow this sermon weeks ago before we changed Gospel readings is *Love Lifted Me*. We chose to keep it, not for the verse which speaks to a first conversion from a sin so deep and dark one thinks there is no redemption. We chose to keep it because its refrain also fits when we imitate the first sin, taking a first bite of a forbidden fruit.

Refrain: "Love lifted me! Love lifted me!
When nothing else could help, Love lifted me.
Love lifted even me! Love lifted even me!
When nothing else could help, Love lifted me."

1) I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore.
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more;
But the Master of the sea heard my despairing cry,
From the waters lifted me; now safe am I.

2) Souls in danger, look above, Jesus completely saves;
He will lift you by his love out of the angry waves.
He's the Master of the sea, billows his will obey,
He your Savior wants to be—be saved today.

ⁱ Gaither Television Productions, Alexandria IN 2001

ⁱⁱ Dinner with Christ is a major theme in John's narratives. This first miracle story sets up a string of meals, some miraculous and some not, through both his gospel and the book of Revelation.

ⁱⁱⁱ My paraphrase to fit this sermon. *The Screwtape Letters* were first published in 1942 by Geoffrey Bles, England.

^{iv} Common English Bible, 2011.