

July 8, 2018



*Sacraments and Sacred Moments:*

**“LIVING LOVE”**

**(Marriage)**

John 2:1-11

Rev. Elbert Paul Dulworth

First United Methodist Church  
Birmingham, Michigan

About twenty-two years ago now, Dawn and I sat down for a premarital counseling session with two great friends and mentors. I was in the middle of my candidacy process for ordained ministry. My supervising elder for candidacy was also the senior pastor of a church where I was serving as a youth director. His wife was my home church pastor when I had experienced my call to ministry. In preparation for ministry and marriage, they thought that it might be best for us to sit down and to talk about both of these journeys together with them.

So one day, these two pastors invited us over for a discussion about marriage, ministry, and the parsonage life. Before hearing her own calling to ministry, the pastor of my home church was a clergy spouse. She had experienced the parsonage family life as both a spouse and a clergyperson.

As our conversations began in their family room that day, Dawn and I shared our dreams of married life together as well as serving together as a pastor and pastor’s spouse. I’m sure we were a little idealistic as we thought about how wonderful it was going to be to serve God together in ministry. What else might you expect from a young couple “in love”?

Even still, I have to confess that Dawn has always been my biggest help and support in ministry. I cannot do what I do without her. She completes me and supports me. She is always encouraging me even as she engages her own passions for ministry. She will tell you that while she doesn’t feel called to ordained ministry, she still feels that it’s a calling for her to be the “pastor’s spouse.”

After listening to some of our hopes and dreams, our clergy friends invited us to think about some of the challenges that we might face in our lives together. How might those challenges be similar to other married couples? How might they be different? While I’m certain that we might have tried hard to come up with those challenges, we were young with much to learn.

At some point, our mentors began to share some examples from their own experiences. They talked about how sometimes church members might expect that a clergy spouse like Dawn

would be able to cook, sing, and play piano. Dawn said, “Well, two out of three isn’t bad.” Early in our marriage, she took a few piano lessons—but only because she wanted to do so, not because it was somehow mandatory.

Our mentors also shared about a time when a parishioner had stopped by the parsonage in crisis. When one of them answered the door, the member of the congregation said, “I need to speak with my pastor...ALONE” as if to invite the clergy spouse who opened the door to find another place to go for a while.

One after another, they shared some of the bigger challenges to being a parsonage family, like the time when one of them preached about parenting on Father’s Day and following the service someone asked how a pastor could preach about parenting when the pastor’s child was not sitting still during worship.

After each scenario they presented, they’d ask us, “So what would you do? How will you respond if that happens?” As any young, optimistic couple, we had an answer for each scenario at first and then eventually found ourselves wondering what we would do. We couldn’t figure out an answer fast enough for them to share another story about the challenges of married life and the parsonage life.

That evening as I drove Dawn home, realizing that we just didn’t know what we might do in all of those situations, she turned to me and said, “We didn’t know about all this. Do you think we should get married?” I was silenced. What would we do? Our plans were in place. Deposit had been made. We were “in love!” Everything was in motion. Were we really not supposed to be married? How would we ever make it through this crisis?

After a while, I turned to Dawn and said, “I don’t think they were looking for answers. I think they just wanted us to know that it’s not all peaches and roses. Sometimes we’ll really have to work at it together to be in ministry and grow in our relationship with one another. They wanted us to know what could happen so that we might be prepared for the trials as well as the joys.” Thanks be to God that the crisis was averted and we made it to the wedding. This year, it will be twenty-one years for us. For the record, we have a few stories of our own to share now as well.

In our lesson from John’s gospel, Jesus is attending a wedding at Cana of Galilee when his mother comes to him with a problem. It seems that the reception is in full swing and there is a huge crisis on their hands early in the marriage. The host has run out of wine too early at the party. It’s not a great way for a newly married couple to start out their life together. What does it say if the reception ends too soon because of poor planning by the hosts? What might that say about their future together? In the midst of the crisis, Mary approaches Jesus about the dilemma.

Jesus responds, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.”<sup>1</sup> It’s almost as if Jesus recognizes that they are the guests and not the hosts. This is not his responsibility.

Gail O’Day also points out in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* commentary that we should not let Jesus’ address to his mother calling her “woman” come across as rude to our postmodern ears. It

may even have been a common address in Jesus' day that didn't carry with it any sense of diminishing her.<sup>2</sup> Jesus' reference to his "hour" or "time," however, seems more eschatological and perhaps indicative of the time of his "glorification" through his "death, resurrection, and ascension."<sup>3</sup> Now is clearly not the time for that glorification.

Even still, Mary tells the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."<sup>4</sup> While Jesus is clear that his time has not yet come, Mary seems to know that Jesus can do something about the crisis that they face at this wedding. In fact, she seems convinced that he will address it even if his words indicate some sort of reluctance on his part. She not only approaches him, but she goes a step further to instruct the servants to do whatever Jesus "tells them" to do. She trusts that he'll do something about the problem.

Eventually, Jesus notices six stone jars that are normally used to hold water for the ritual washing or purification. He instructs the servants to fill the jars with water. When they are filled to the top, he invites them to draw out some of the water and take it to the "chief steward," or the "wedding coordinator" in today's terms. When the steward tastes it, he notes that it is the best wine he's had all night. In fact, he jests with the groom about saving the good wine for the end of the party. Usually a host would serve the best wine first and then a lower-grade wine when everyone has had too much.<sup>5</sup> By that time, no one would care how the wine tastes.

As much as this story takes place at a wedding, I'm wondering how much it has to do with the wedding itself. While this story from John's gospel is one of the more popular passages of scripture chosen for weddings, it seems to go deeper than a message about marriage. Besides, the motivating relationship in the story is the relationship that Jesus shares with his mother. She's the one who convinces him to act.

In John's gospel, this story takes place early in Jesus' ministry. Transforming water into wine at this wedding is the first of seven signs that Jesus performs throughout the gospel. In verse 11, John writes, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him."<sup>6</sup> Towards the end of the gospel, following the resurrection, in John 20:30-31, the writer declares, "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."<sup>7</sup>

The author of John's gospel is clear that he tells the stories of the signs that Jesus performs so that others might believe that Jesus is the "Messiah," the "Son of God," and "by believing," "have life in his name." For John, it's about relationship with Jesus Christ and finding life in Christ. At Cana, Jesus shows up at an ordinary wedding and turns ordinary water into wine. He takes the ordinary of everyday life and makes it extraordinary and sacred so that others may come to believe.

Early in the order of worship for weddings, we hear words similar to this: "With his presence and power Jesus graced a wedding at Cana of Galilee, and in his sacrificial love gave us the example for the love revealed in the marriage covenant." Jesus' sacrificial love gives us the example for a love that is lived out in healthy relationships. The ordinary relationships that we experience in life become extraordinary and sacred in order that God's love might be seen in our lives.

If we think that his presence and the sign, or miracle, at Cana was just about marriage, then we miss the point of the story. The focus of the story is on Jesus' love and desire for others to believe and to find life in relationship with him as they come to believe. Jesus witnesses for us what loving and healthy relationships look like in our lives as he offers himself in love to all of us, regardless of our marital status. The ordinary becomes sacred and extraordinary in the presence of Christ, like water into wine.

At the end of the order of worship for a wedding, there is a two-part benediction. There is a benediction for the couple which says, "God the Eternal keep you in love with each other, so that the peace of Christ may abide in your home. Go to serve God and your neighbor in all that you do." Then it is followed by a benediction, or blessing, for everyone gathered together: "Bear witness to the love of God in this world, so that those to whom love is a stranger will find in you generous friends." Ordinary love becomes a sacred witness to Christ.

Together, as Christ's body, whenever we live out healthy relationships with one another, we bear witness to God's love in the world in such ways that those who have not known God's unconditional love discover generous friendships among us. When we love those around us, it sends a message about God's love and care for the world around us. How exactly can we be certain to be sending the best messages about that love as we live out healthy relationships?

In an article entitled *5 Traits of Healthy Relationships*, originally from July 6, 2016 in *The Huffington Post*, the author, Michael Thomas Sunnarborg, notes that "healthy relationships are equitable; both people contribute equally or at least balance out in the long run." Sunnarborg goes on to say, "Our personal relationships are an essential part of life. We are naturally wired to connect and collaborate with others." He suggests that relationships that are healthy exhibit five key traits:

1. "Communication is consistent."—Communication is not just about speaking, but also about listening. He says, "Sometimes we learn the most about ourselves from each other."
2. "Respect isn't optional, it's necessary."—"Respect comes from appreciating differences, considering perspectives, and honoring preferences."
3. "Healthy boundaries are clear."—"Setting personal boundaries allows us to express our truth and beliefs to others with confidence and courage. Acknowledging and honoring the personal boundaries of others demonstrates respect and builds trust."
4. "Growing together is as important as growing individually."—"Growing together in relationship means being able to learn from each other, embrace differences, and choose to walk together on a common path."
5. "Love conquers all."—"Real love conquers all doubt, fear, shortcomings, feelings of inadequacy, and negativity." He's not saying that love will solve all of our problems. Rather, "To be truly loved by someone is to be recognized and 'seen' for all of the things you are—complete and whole—with all of your strengths and weaknesses; ups and downs; fabulousness and foibles. When we learn to love, accept, support, and appreciate ourselves, our relationships will always benefit."<sup>8</sup>

Is this not the type of love that Christ has for us; an unconditional love that recognizes who we are and still claims us that we might be transformed in love? Perhaps healthy relationships in all their variety require some work when we think about it; work for all those concerned. Then again, transformation is not always easy work either.

Brian Wren, the writer of our closing hymn this morning, reminds us in the final stanza:

So in a hundred names,  
each day we all can meet  
a presence, sensed and shown  
at work, at home,  
or in the street.  
Yet every name we see,  
shines in a brighter sun:  
In Christ alone  
is Love full grown  
and life and hope begun.<sup>9</sup>

When our relationship with Christ transforms our lives, our relationships with others can be transformed and transformational as well; the ordinary becomes an extraordinary sign of God's love and grace. As the ordinary becomes sacred, might our love and care for others be a life-giving sign of Christ's own heart for the world so that all may come to believe and, by believing, experience life in Jesus Christ.

---

<sup>1</sup> John 2:3-4.

<sup>2</sup> O'Day, Gail R. *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. IX., ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 1995), 536-7.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 537.

<sup>4</sup> John 2:5, NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> John 2:6-10.

<sup>6</sup> John 2:11, NRSV.

<sup>7</sup> John 20:30-31, NRSV.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-thomas-sunnarborg/5-traits-of-healthy-relat\\_b\\_10822130.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-thomas-sunnarborg/5-traits-of-healthy-relat_b_10822130.html)

<sup>9</sup> Wren, Brian. *How Can We Name a Love*, 1973.