

Mother Knows Best : a sermon from John 2:1-11 preached at Rockland Congregational 1/20/13

By Rev. Lois Coppola

Several years ago I traveled to Israel with my father and we spent a day in "Cana" at a site that is believed to be where the "first sign" described in today's gospel reading occurred. The Holy Land is marked with many "possible sights" where Jesus and his disciples traveled and stayed. Cana is a village about 20 miles west of the Sea of Galilee which is really a fresh-water lake, and in comparison, only a few miles larger than Lake Sebago here in Maine. Nazareth the village where Mary, "The Mother of Jesus" is from is approximately 10 miles south of Cana...all only a day or two walk from each other I think. If we think of the Harbor here in Rockland as Galilee then Cana might be around Washington, Maine and Nazareth in the vicinity of Jefferson. I want you to have an idea of these locations because of the casualness of the relationship Jesus possibly has with the wedding party.

Mary and her son Jesus are invited to a wedding. There are some interesting clues in the passage that help us become aware that Mary has some stature as a guest.

I have always found this kind of a delightful passage of scripture. Imagining Jesus and his mother, and his newly selected disciples at a wedding in some ways seems so ordinary. Weddings in the Jewish tradition would have been in a family home, not a banquet hall like we are familiar with and would have lasted a week. The entire village and of course relatives from afar would have attended; Much like having a huge family reunion. We are getting a glimpse of Jesus being at a party with his extended family, his mother and of course a half a dozen or so men who are now "followers" of Jesus; his disciples.

Then there is a "conversation" between Jesus and "his Mother" that leads to Jesus bringing about his first of many signs in John's Gospel.

As Protestants we don't place any special emphasis on Mary...we hear about her during Advent when the Angel Gabriel comes to tell her she will carry God's son, we know of course that she gave birth to Jesus in a stable and there is the echo "she pondered these things in her heart from Luke's gospel. Also in Luke "the mother of Jesus" speaks to him in a concerned voice when Jesus "went missing" as a young boy "Child, (she says) why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great

anxiety!” We also understand the mother of Jesus to be present on the final day when Jesus is crucified on the cross.

As a hospice chaplain I visit people every day during a very difficult time in their lives. The area that I serve in Massachusetts is more heavily Roman Catholic than Protestant. Because of this I am very familiar with saying the Rosary. Often I praying a Hail Mary before I leave my Catholic patient and this is very comforting to them. It is “The Blessed Mother” that they hope will intercede for them to understand their suffering and bring them peace. In the Catholic tradition there are a number of “Feast Days” that are devotedly observed and most of them are for remembering Mary’s role as the Mother of Jesus; the bearer of God.

As a woman and a mother I admit I have felt my “Protestant upbringing” lacking that kind of intimacy with such a devoted historical and biblical character that I believe understood better than anyone who Jesus is. And as a mother she also understood a particular kind of suffering that any parent feels when they see their own child suffering.

I once took a course in Judaism with a Rabbi who in respectful humor shared “you know every Jewish mother thinks HER son is the Messiah.”

The point I am trying to make here is... Mary Knew; Mary knows her son is the Messiah.

John’s Gospel is very different from the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and Mark. All are intentional about the purpose of their Gospel; Matthew highlights the Jewish identity of Jesus; he is the proclaimed one from Isaiah “look the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call him Emmanuel.” (Is7:14). Mark is straight forward about the “ministry” of Jesus as it begins by telling us he is the “Son of God” and we see Jesus being baptized immediately. Luke’s Gospel is “an orderly account which includes the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection so that we would understand Jesus as the “Savior of Humanity.”

The writer of John is equally intentional about his purpose. However, He wants us to grasp that “Jesus IS the divine reality”

He is intentional about being both theological and historical. Therefore it is important to go back to the very first chapter and verse “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God... “He doesn’t start with a genealogy, or a birth narrative, he doesn’t start with a particular place in

time but rather “before” time; “In the Beginning” He wants us to understand that Jesus was and is the divine reality made known.

But let’s get back to the wedding. Everyone enjoys a wedding especially the reception or feast; good food, dancing, reconnecting with friends and family and of course wine! As I mentioned before they often lasted a week. It is believed that when Jesus arrived with his disciples and his mother is already there; it was already a few days into the celebration. Even though Mary is never mentioned by name I want to use her name for the purpose of her familiarity.

So, Mary is there and her son Jesus arrives bringing several men who although welcome, were probably not expected and we can imagine Mary’s concern; the Groom and his Bride will soon run out of wine.

The hospitality of the married couple would have needed to be generous; feeding whoever came for at least a week. Wine was of course an important beverage and to “run out” would have been a disgrace; for years to come they could be remembered as “the ones who ran out of wine at their wedding.” Not just embarrassing, but economically a concern because for all future endeavors they may be regarded as unable to follow through on expected customs.

Mary, the mother of Jesus was possibly a relative of this family and was rightfully concerned for their reputation; she also knew Jesus could do something about this problem.

Now, at first hand, someone running out of wine...and Jesus doing something about it as his “first sign” almost seems trivial, certainly not as cool as healing the blind man or raising Lazarus from the dead, which happens later in John’s Gospel.

So why is the writer offering this seemingly less than extraordinary sign as “the first?” What did Jesus do that was still significant for us to understand? After all “John” would not have given it a place in his Gospel if it was not very important. I believe he wants us to understand how “the divine reality” is active and concerned with our day to day needs.

And Jesus’ Mother Knows best....I believe she is fully aware of what Jesus can do and how important it will be for all involved: The bride and groom, Jesus, His disciples and for us.

Mary leans toward her son and informs him “They have no wine.” She whispers.

Jesus’ response to her seems at first glance by the modern reader; that is you and me, to be harsh I think, almost rude or disrespectful. But if we investigate into the Hebrew language and culture his response was a common conversational phrase. An adult son calling his mother “Woman” was both respectful and appropriate. Maybe the southern expression of “yes, Ma’am” comes closest to our understanding of it. “And what concern is that to you or me?” may sound condescending to us but the tone was more likely saying something like “ Don’t worry, all in God’s time” as he closes it with “My hour has not yet come.”

But again, Mother knows best. It’s kind of like any one of us watching our adult children saying or doing something when we already know the outcome. Or have you ever put a “bug” in someones ear and it becomes “their idea” to complete? I wonder if Mary smiled an inward smile as she spoke to the nearby servants’ “Do as he tells you” (Which is one of those clues that Mary held some prestige in these surrounding, otherwise a woman would not have given instructions to a servant in a setting where she is not known).

When I was in Cana there were stone jars on display for us to see. Picture a thirty gallon sized trash barrel made of stone: Six of those.

As noted in the reading they were used for “purification” or rather washing. A Jewish household was expected to be clean and all of their guest would have had the opportunity to be able to wash their hands and even their feet if needed as they arrived and throughout their stay.

It seems six of those stone jars were now standing empty.

Jesus instructs the servants to fill them with water.

After filling them they are further instructed to “draw some out” and offer it to the chief steward (today’s version of the wedding planner) to taste it.

AHHHH....the water has miraculously been turned into the finest of wine!

The first sign and Mary is smiling I am sure. Not only because she sees her son save the reputation of this young couple but because she knows this sign

reveals to his disciples what she has always known, that her son is the Messiah. And it is an extravagant one: the wine is the best!

Why does John reveal Jesus' divine reality in action to us here and now; At a feast for a bride and groom?

Well, I am glad you asked.

Our lives are filled with day to day challenges. We might wonder how we are going to pay next month's bills or fill the gas tank up so we can get to work. We might be struggling with making sure we have enough food on our table to feed our family or just ourselves. Even if we are blessed with being financially stable and can afford to pay bills, fill up the gas tank and put food on the table there are worries that make us unsure of what lies ahead for us. I have them and I know you do too.

We often remember the miracles of Jesus healing the sick and the blind and we pray that God will heal us in our times of great need....but the truth is God is with us right now in the day to day needs.

In many ways we are like Mary too. We see a need somewhere and we know we can do something about it, if at the very least we might ask Jesus to do something about it. You know, that thing we call prayer.

The wedding of Cana is a story that isn't always at the forefront of our mind when we think of the life, ministry and miraculous works of Jesus but it is significant in that it teaches us how he is revealed to us during a very ordinary event, a sacred event in the life of a couple. But, isn't everyday made sacred? Our lives are sacred, your life is sacred; getting up in the morning and doing whatever it is you do each day is sacred. John wants us to know that Jesus is the divine reality that makes everything about who we are and what we do each day sacred.

[following paragraph added during sermon]

I want to add my most recent experience with how God intervenes in the day to day. Yesterday I was preparing this sermon, typing away on my computer. When it was finished and I went to print it my daughter Sarah's printer was not working. I took my USB drive to my brother's house on Old County. His computer was not accepting the USB driver. Naturally I am getting a bit frustrated and worried. We decided to e-mail it to his computer from mine. Then we went to print...his printer ran out of ink. A trip to staples...finally it

was printed. I know I didn't need to worry...God was there for me (and I got to spend time with my brother).

Now there is another purpose for John's Gospel, related to the knowledge that Jesus is the Divine reality of God and he states this in Chapter 20 verse 31 "that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Life! That you can "be in existence, be in time with HIM."

Jesus' Glory is revealed to his disciples, from that first sign at the wedding in Cana "[they] believed in him."

Mother Knows Best! Maybe we can identify with Mary in this story. Or maybe we can put our faith in what Mary knows, has always known.

Sometimes we are the true believer who knows when to call on Jesus for help and sometimes we need a Mary figure in our life to point us towards what she has known all along. That Jesus IS the Messiah.

Just as it was important to point out that John starts his Gospel with reminding us that Jesus was "In the beginning" I think it is also important to note what John states at the very end of his Gospel "there were many more signs that Jesus did ...but if every one of them were written down, I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

And it could not for not only was Jesus in the beginning of time he lives in and through time and is with us in all time. His signs continue and each day I pray He is revealed to you in some small but no less significant way.

And as My Mother in Law was fond of saying "You Better Believe It!" Amen.