

Trusting in the Whatever

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Proverbs 3:1-6

My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you. Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will find favor and high regard in the sight of God and of people. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

John 2:1-12

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman, what concern is that to me and to you? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them up to

the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the person in charge of the banquet." So they took it. When the person in charge tasted the water that had become wine and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), that person called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.

This past week, I found in my files an article from the Register of the Kentucky Historical Society. My first pastorate was in the Bluegrass. I never subscribed to the journal and don't recall who gave me the issue either, but the article is called "Revelry and Religion." It offered this story: "A revenue agent once apprehended a moonshiner carrying a loaded jug down the road. The bootlegger insisted that the jug contained only water. The federal agent took a swig, sputtered, gasped for breath, and then insisted that the Kentuckian sample the jug. The bootlegger did so, then exclaimed in mock surprise: 'What do you know! The good Lord's gone and done it again!'" (Carson, Gerald, *The Social History of Bourbon*. New York, 1963, p. 1)

While I suspect his response didn't prevent confiscation or a fine, it did represent some creativity on his part and an adaptive use of Scriptural events. As the Biblical scene we just read recalls the moment that the Kentucky man had in mind, the day Jesus changed water into wine.

It occurred at a wedding in Cana. John records that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was present, as were her son and his disciples. We know from other sources that in those days a wedding celebration often lasted for seven days, and it was at such an event in Cana that the host ran out of wine. When Mary hears the news, she turns to Jesus and says, "They have no wine." To our ears, those words could be heard as only casual conversation or even a word of sympathy for the embarrassment such a reality would have created for the host, but Jesus clearly hears a different tone and understands that his mother intends for him to do something about it.

His response shows that he knows she is not suggesting he go and buy wine, as Jesus replies, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." Mary doesn't answer him, but instead turns to the servants and says, "Do whatever he tells you." Jesus instructs them to

fill six stone jars with water. John tells us each jar could hold 20-30 gallons of water, and after the servants complete that task, Jesus says, “Now draw some out and take it to the chief steward.” They do that, and without knowing the source of the wine, the steward tastes it and praises the groom for saving the best wine for last. John concludes, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

Over the centuries, there have been many interpretations offered of that scene. Some hear it in echoes of the Lord’s Supper or the first use of that image of a wedding banquet Jesus will call upon later to speak of his return at the Second Coming. Others view that scene as a reminder of the abundant nature of God’s response in our lives; just as 180 gallons of wine would have been far more than what was required at a wedding, so does God provide us with more than we need or could imagine. Still others have focused upon how, when Jesus told his mother, “My hour has not yet come,” he was proclaiming to her and us that all things unfold in God’s timing.

Such lessons are among the many faithful ones that can be drawn from those events, yet in anticipation of this Mother’s Day, I was taken by the exchange between Jesus and Mary. Much of the attention in commentaries focuses on Jesus’ response, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?”, and on efforts to make it sound less harsh. Many scholars, for instance, will say that calling her “woman” was not a putdown, but a term of endearment noting that three years later from the cross he will say “Woman, here is your son,” placing Mary into the care of the beloved disciple.” (John 19:26). Others point out that his concluding words of “what concern is that to you and to me?” was simply a Jewish idiom from that era meaning only the lack of wine was not his problem, much as someone today might say “That’s no skin off my back.”

Even his comment, “My hour has not yet come,” sounds to me like he is saying, “Mom, it’s too early for me to show that kind of power.”

Certainly, none of us was present to hear the tone of voice, but I think Jesus’ response stung Mary. Years later, when Jesus learns his mother and brothers are waiting outside, he turns to the crowd before him and declares, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” That response could not have been easy for his earthly family to hear, either.

Yet whatever Jesus’ tone of voice in Cana, it’s Mary’s response that stands out for me. She hears his words and then turns to the servants gathered around and says, “Do whatever he tells you.” Did she know what Jesus was going to do? I don’t think so. There is no Scriptural record of his power prior to this scene. There is an apocryphal document from the 1st century called *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* that purports to describe the childhood of Jesus, including a time he heals his brother of a fever and brings clay doves to life. The Bible doesn’t tell us such things, though, and thus has no reason to believe Mary knew what he was about to do.

Yet she knew him. She knew the character of the man she had raised and, unlike any other mother, knew Jesus’ role in God’s plan. Thus, whether or not his words were hurtful to hear, her trust was unwavering.

Her reaction reminds me of the response of another woman from the 20th century. My father, who was also a Presbyterian pastor, once told me of an older woman in his first pastorate who would regularly fall asleep during his sermons. Dad let it go for a few months, but then summoned up the courage to ask about it. “Mrs. Buck,” he said, “I noticed you go to sleep on me each Sunday.” Without being ruffled or embarrassed or defensive, she responded to her 24-year-old pastor by saying, “Son, I’ve heard you enough now to know that I can trust you.”

That was the hope expressed in our first lesson, too. That passage from the book of Proverbs recalls the words of King Solomon to his son, “My child, do not forget my teaching,” he began, “but let your heart keep my commandments.” Solomon was renowned for his wisdom, and thus there could have been many pieces of instruction that he encouraged his offspring to write “on the tablet of your heart.” Yet in our passage, there is one thing in particular he wanted his offspring to remember: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart,” he said, “and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”

Mary displayed that kind of trust. The instructions she gave were to those serving guests at the wedding. “Do whatever he tells you;” directions that showed an abiding confidence in him.

Martin Luther, the Catholic priest who inadvertently launched the Protestant Reformation 509 years ago, once preached a sermon about the events in Cana, clearly believing Jesus’ words to be harsh. “See how unkindly he turns away the humble request of his mother,” Luther said, “who addresses him with such great confidence.” Yet instead of viewing that son’s response as a negative, the Reformer went on to speak of how that verbal exchange demonstrated Mary’s faith.

“Now observe how his mother acts,” Luther continued, “and here becomes our teacher. However harsh his words sound, however unkind he appears, she does not in her heart interpret this as anger, or as the opposite of kindness, but adheres firmly to the conviction that he is kind, refusing to give up this opinion because of the thrust she received and unwilling to dishonor him in her heart by thinking him to be otherwise than kind and gracious...Hence, the highest thought in this Gospel lesson...is that we honor God as being good and gracious, even if he acts and speaks otherwise, and all our understanding and feeling be otherwise...She is certain that he will be gracious, though she does not feel it.” (cited by

Bruner, Frederick Dale in *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016, p. 138)

I think Luther was onto something in that assessment, as in our own journey of faith, there are times when the circumstances we face can wound or discourage us, too. In our case, it might not be due to a direct word from Jesus that was hard to hear, but prayers fervently offered that seemed to go unanswered. For us, it might not have arisen when we wanted God to act in a particular way, but when loved ones went through painful events, we cannot imagine it as God's will. In our case, it may not have been when wine ran out at a wedding, but when a troubling test result came back, or we were denied admission to our dream college, when the promotion went to someone else, or a relationship ended. In every life, there are moments difficult to understand as we ponder our next step. In such times, we hear Mary say, "Do whatever he tells you."

In a previous pastorate, there was a member named Don Wright, who at the time of his death at 86 had been a part of that congregation for fourteen years. Don and his wife Shirley joined a year or so before I arrived, and while they were faithful in worship attendance, they were not otherwise involved in any regular way. Just a few months before her own death, which came quite unexpectedly, Shirley had told Don that they needed to get more active, and soon after her passing, he was elected as a deacon, ordained at age 80, and served well throughout his term.

During the last year of his life, Don had a stroke and a number of other health challenges, too. In what turned out to be my final visit with him, I saw Don at his apartment in a local care facility. He was confined to bed at that point and spoke to me with candor about his declining health and how medicine had done all that it could. It then became one of those moments of blessing for me as a pastor when I was invited into some of the most profound times of life. Don said he didn't know how much time he had left and then added, "When I think about my wife and family and the

heavenly experience that awaits, I have no fear of dying.” He spoke of how he was looking forward to a reunion with a brother who had died at age 21 in a motorcycle accident when Don was only five. I then asked how he felt about his prognosis. Don thought for a second and then said, “I figure that either way it goes, I’ll be one happy camper.”

That’s trusting in the whatever. Knowing that in life and in death we belong to God is a kind of assurance that allows us to remain confident in all circumstances. When, like the mother of Jesus, even when we don’t know what will happen next, we can proclaim our trust yet again in the One whose abundant love never ends.