

“Glorious Giving”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
January 19, 2025 - Second Sunday after the Epiphany

[Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11](#)

Have you ever turned water into wine, as Jesus did in today’s gospel lesson from John? Perhaps not, but you probably have tuned “wine” into “water.” We all have, and it hasn’t taken any miraculous or marvelous power, for it is the common way of people to take things that are vibrant and lovely and to transform them through our own deeds, misdeeds, or non-deeds into things that are plain and lifeless. The good news that we celebrate today is that Jesus takes those things that we have made plain and lifeless and transforms them again into being wonderful.

Please pray with me... “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen” (William Sloan Coffin).

The scene of our gospel lesson, though written a couple of millennia ago, is one that seems pretty familiar to us still today. Mary and her adult son Jesus, along with his disciples, and perhaps other members of their family as well, were in Cana, just a few miles north of their hometown of Nazareth, for a wedding celebration. And as it happens -- as it commonly does at weddings -- a problem arises. Things seem to go off the rails when the wedding hosts run out of refreshments to serve all their guests. This party-ending gaffe would have been just as embarrassing and socially disastrous for the newlyweds and their families then as it would be for a couple today.

Mary, full of grace and graciousness, sees the problem and springs into action, by telling her oldest child about the problem and telling him to do something to help. His response is a very human one as he replies, “This is not our problem.” But Mary persists in helping Jesus to see that *it is his problem* and to do something about it, so she gathers together the party’s servers and tells them to go to Jesus and to follow the instructions that *he will* give them.

Though it was not his plan to perform some miraculous deed at the party, his mother Mary convinced him to change his plans to meet the need of the moment,

and so he gave instructions for the servers to gather some nearby stone vessels, normally used to hold water for religious rituals, and to fill these up. Once they were filled, he had one of the servants to dip a cup into one of the vessels to draw out some of its contents to take to the event host, who sipped from the cup and was delighted to taste that it contained wine of the finest quality and to learn that there was plenty enough of it for the wedding banquet to continue.

In this day-saving act, Jesus performed the first of what the gospel of John calls signs, symbolic actions through which Jesus revealed his glory and inspired faith from others. And from this story about Jesus giving the first of these signs, we can take away a few lessons.

One of these is that the person who first demonstrates a glorious act is Jesus' mother Mary. As soon as she learns that there is a problem, she is moved with compassion. Mary sees the problem of the newlyweds and considers it to be her own problem and Jesus' problem and the problem of everyone else gathered there, and Mary is moved by her compassion to act and to get her miracle-working son Jesus to do something about their common problem.

In this gracious mindset of Mary, she taught long before the time of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. a truth he echoed in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, in which he wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Just as Mary taught Jesus (and his disciples) at the wedding in Cana that the problem of the newlyweds was their problem and should inspire them to do what they could to help, Martin Luther King also taught that the problem of injustice in the form of racial inequality and segregation, experienced most acutely by people in some parts of this country, is a real problem for all of us in all parts of this country and should be addressed by all of us everywhere.

In our own time, in which we are more connected than ever and more disconnected than ever, we need to be reminded that our neighbor's problem is our problem. Hungry children in Gaza are our problem. Disease in Sudan is our problem. War in Ukraine is our problem. Devastation caused by wildfires in California is our problem. Racial injustice here is still our problem. Hatred of political others is our growing problem.

Another lesson we can learn from the story of the wedding in Cana is that when we own a problem together, we can act together to do something about it. We can petition and prod the more empowered as Mary persisted in petitioning Jesus to act. We can organize and direct action as Jesus called the servants to gather jars, fill them with water, and distribute their miraculously transformed contents. We can offer the best of what we have, wine of the finest quality, to make today better than yesterday and tomorrow better yet.

In our compassionate work, in our giving for the good of our neighbors, near and far, we join with Jesus in performing life-changing miracles. God's glory is revealed as the world is changed for good. And when God's glorious acts are revealed through us, we are transformed, becoming less spiritually dull and lifeless and more vibrant and lovely. God changes our water into the finest wine.

So let us be willing vessels of the good stuff. Let us be willing participants in miracles of renewal in the world, our neighborhood, and in our own lives. Let us graciously and generously share the good stuff we have and are. May God be glorified in our giving. Amen.