

“WWMS--What Would Mary Say”

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First Presbyterian Church
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**New Testament Lesson: John 2:1-15
Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 36:5-10**

In the magazine “Dimensions for Living,” James Moore tells about Mr. Wilson and Mr. Thompson, two seriously ill patients sharing the same hospital room. ... Mr. Thompson had to spend all his time flat on his back. Mr. Wilson was allowed to sit up in bed for an hour each day. His bed was next to the window, and every afternoon, ... he would pass the time by describing to Mr. Thompson what he could see outside. Mr. Thompson began to live for those hours. Mr. Wilson would look out the window and describe ...

- a beautiful park with a lake, where there were ducks and swans and children throwing them bread and sailing model boats;
- softball games and football games and kites flying;
- flowers and trees and stretches of grass where young lovers walked hand-in-hand;
- the skyline of the city off in the distance and the cars and horse-drawn carriages making their way through the park. Mr. Thompson listened intently, enjoying every minute. He could visualize everything Mr. Wilson described.

Then one afternoon, Mr. Thompson thought to himself: “Just wait a minute! Why should Wilson have all the fun? Why does he have all the pleasure? Why does he get to be by the window?”

Over the next few days, Mr. Thompson turned sour. He was bitter, angry, and resentful. He brooded and seethed. He became obsessed with wanting to be by the window! And each passing hour, he became more and more resentful of Mr. Wilson.

Then one night, quite suddenly, Mr. Wilson died. ... As soon as it seemed decent, Mr. Thompson asked if he could be moved to the bed next to the window. So they moved him, tucked him in, made him quite comfortable and left him alone. The minute they'd gone, Mr. Thompson struggled to prop himself up on one elbow so he could look out the window ... only to find ... it faced a brick wall! Through the merciful lens of his God-given compassion, Mr. Wilson had shared things ... that defied the human eye.

So, you see, sometimes true miracles and blessings are so much more than meets the eye. We don't always see how God is blessing us. We don't always appreciate what's already being done just beneath the surface, just waiting for the right time to reveal itself as a miracle straight from God.

In today's New Testament reading, the wine steward and the wedding guests don't know what Jesus has done for them, that it is a miracle from God.

“Everyone serves the good wine first and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you,” the steward tells the bridegroom, “have kept the good wine until now,” which of course is not what happened. The bridegroom actually ran out of wine.

So, what did really happen there? What kind of miracle are we dealing with here? Did Jesus merely go on a divine “beer run,” so to speak (I mean, I know it was wine). But really, what just happened?

Do you suppose there is something more going on here than merely meeting the needs of the happy couple and their guests?

The answer is yes, and no. The answer is yes because with Jesus there is always something more going on. No matter how many times we hear the same stories about him, we can always learn something new, because we ourselves, are always in new situations. Yes, there’s always more than meets the eye, and that’s true with today’s reading. There is a weightier lesson to be had here.

But at the same time, Jesus did turn water into wine, which was a simple blessing for the couple and their wedding guests. Even though there’s always more going on with Jesus, the simple truth is he meets us in our ordinary, everyday lives. Jesus meets our true needs. In other words, on one level, this is a story about Jesus meeting the simple needs of the happy couple and their guests. Let’s look at that.

You know the story: Jesus, the disciples, his mother – all at a wedding celebration. The wine runs out, mom tells Jesus, and he says, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” – which Bible scholars tell us is not as cold as it sounds. In his commentary on this passage, William Barclay notes that the phrase “What concern is that to you and to me?” was a common conversational phrase that, when spoken gently, simply indicated a misunderstanding. “It means: ‘Don’t worry; you don’t quite understand ...; leave things to me’” Barclay also notes that when Jesus addresses his mother as “woman,” that was actually a title of respect.

So, Jesus is simply saying “don’t worry; be happy; I’ll handle it.” And with that, his mother says to the servants working the celebration, “Do whatever he tells you.” Jesus’ mother has complete confidence in her son, even though he also tells her, “My hour has not yet come.”

It’s almost as if Mary has more confidence in Jesus and the timing of things than Jesus himself has. Or to put it another way, you can always learn a thing or two from mom, no matter how old you are or how successful.

Mary knows that her son is the embodiment of divine compassion and he would never let a true need go unmet, for those who are open to his ministry.

The sad part is, too often we greet even the blessings in our lives with doubt and fear and resistance. And still, Jesus stand ready to meet our needs, if we let him.

It's like the pastor who admitted being a little smart-aleck as a teenager. She remembers listening to her great-aunt rail against the "demon alcohol" and how she just couldn't resist reminding her great-aunt about Jesus and his first miracle at Cana with all that wine.

But I like her great-aunt's response even more, because it's so human. She said, "I know (about Jesus turning water into wine), and I'd have thought a heap lot more of him if he hadn't."¹

We do that, don't we? We pick and choose how to interpret the miracles of God happening right in front of us, assuming we actually have eyes to see, as Jesus would say, spiritual eyes to see the miracles God is bringing ever closer to us.

I mean think about it, the bridegroom could have stepped in and said, "Don't listen to this man Jesus, he's only a guest here." He could have done that just as easily as we sometimes resist, overlook, and push back on the blessings that God desires for us. There's always free will, for good or for ill.

What we learn here is that through Christ, when we're open to his leading, God is always there for us – to help with whatever need we may be facing, even the simple need of escaping the embarrassment of running out of wine in the middle of a once-in-a-lifetime celebration.

God is just that good! God is always there for us, if we're open to God's leading. To bring this closer to home, let's look at the New Beginnings process that we as a church began on Tuesday. We had an Appreciative Inquiry session led by a consultant matched to First Church by our denomination's national ministry staff.

But before that even happened, the first thing we were told about this or any other such program or process is that it's only worth doing if you're willing as a church to go through the hard work of change and transformation.

This means that, as our consultant the Rev. Kim said Tuesday night, there might be some tears, there will be uncomfortable moments. But I am convinced and Rev. Kim is convinced and I hope and pray that you all are convinced that God is and has been up to something here at First Presbyterian Church of Independence, that God did not bring us this far to let us down now.

The fact is, the only way we can fail is if we get in our own way – or more precisely, get in the way of what God is doing in our midst. Trust the process, said the Rev. Kim. Or as Jesus' mother might say to us, "Do whatever Jesus tells you."

In other words, try not to be reactionary. Instead, be objective, look at things in the light of day, seek out and do the will of God, in a decent and orderly fashion – trusting the process.

¹ Carol Pagelsen, First Presbyterian Church, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, in an e-mail correspondence with *Homiletics*.

Mary said to the servants concerning Jesus, “Do whatever he tells you.” In other words, trust the process, follow his Christ’s leadership, have faith that Jesus will guide you – guide us – into blessing upon blessing. Through those simple words of Mary – “do whatever (Jesus) tells you” – we can be assured that God will bless us and see us through to a brighter and more vibrant future.

That’s the simple lesson from today’s New Testament reading – “Do whatever HE says.” Our God is not a god who lets the true needs of his people go unmet, if we remain faithful and open to God’s leading.

(CONTEMPORARY) I did mention there was this simple lesson AND a more weighty lesson to be had today, which has to do with comparing Jesus to the six jars of water-turned-to-wine. I’ll make this brief.

Simply put, the water jars were there for the guest to bathe with “for the Jewish rites of purification,” as the passage from John says. This is because the ancient Jews had strict laws about washing hands and feet as a sign of purification. “If it was not done,” says Barclay, “the hands were technically unclean,” ritually unclean, regardless of how dirty or clean they actually were. Purification was both a physical and a spiritual act.

So the weightier insight to be grasped here – other than God meeting our true needs – is that through Jesus we are purified and made clean. And not only in little things and from time to time, but in all things forever and ever. Those six jars for purification each held 20 or 30 gallons, and that adds up to 180 gallons of wine; 180 gallons of blessing, 180 gallons of joy, 180 gallons of grace, through the miracle of Jesus!

The point is Jesus has enough power and grace to transform any circumstance from one of doubt and fear and scarcity to one of certainty and perfection and abundance. With Jesus we are – and will be again – transformed, again and again, moving ever closer to what God desires for us.

No matter what you are facing. No matter what you’re concerned about. No matter how hopeless a situation may seem, when we turn to Christ in faith, there is always a way forward, always a hidden blessing, just around the corner.

Our only job is to remain faithful to God and God’s church, to get out of our own way, and to allow God’s blessing to wash over us. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Almighty God, your Son preached justice and social equality — and the coming of the kingdom of God. The apostle Paul reminds us that we are one in Christ, that “There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female.” But we know that is not true in practice.

We are divided by race, gender, economics, politics and religion. We give thanks this morning for all who have fought and struggled against discrimination, seeking change and equality for all people; We give thanks for people like Martin Luther King Jr., who preached and lived the gospel so eloquently.

We ask you to grant us courage to act – and not turn away in fear – when we see oppression and discrimination.

Help us also to preach and live out the gospel each day. Open our eyes to injustice and loosen our tongues to speak out against it.

Help us to trust that you always give us the strength we need.

We ask all this in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever.
Amen.**