“Not My Problem”

*John 2:1-11*

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 you and to me? 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 chief steward.” So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward 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.

Whenever I’m working with a couple who’s getting married, one of the last things I tell them at the end of the wedding rehearsal is this. No matter what else happens tomorrow, by the end of the day, you’ll be married. We’ll accomplish that main goal, and anything else will make a good story later. A forgotten ring, an errant flower girl, a candle that won’t stay lit, an unexpected downpour, a cake-cutting gone awry—things may not go precisely the way you mean them to, but it all will become something you’ll laugh about when you remember the day on future anniversaries.

The same was not true in the story told in today’s scripture reading. The first-century wedding customs in question did not involve ring bearers or unity candles or white dresses or tuxedos or limousines. There were several stages to the process, and the part described in today’s text was the final one—the wedding feast, the public celebration of the union. This was the opportunity for the community to bless the couple, to lend their presence and their voices and their good spirits to these two people as they began their life together as spouses.

The feasts would often go on for several days. And to have enough refreshments, and particularly enough wine, was essential. It was not merely a social lubricant—it was a sign of God’s abundance, of the plentiful harvest, of hospitality for the guests and blessing for the couple. So to run out of wine was not something that would make a good story later. It was not
merely an awkward party foul. It was a disastrous end to a happy occasion, a disastrous beginning to the rest of your life.

Jesus’ mother—in John’s gospel, she is never named, but of course we know her as Mary—Jesus’ mother was a compassionate woman. When she discovered that this problem had arisen, she wanted to do something about it. She wanted to help the couple avoid such an inauspicious fate. And so, she turned to Jesus.

Now, it’s only been two weeks in our calendar since we celebrated Epiphany, remembering the arrival of the wise men from the east to visit the stable in Bethlehem. It’s been less than a month since Christmas, since we sang of herald angels and humble shepherds and friendly beasts. But in the life of Jesus, thirty years or so have passed. Jesus is a grown man now. He has been baptized by John the Baptist, and he is beginning his public ministry.

But whether it had been thirty minutes or thirty days or thirty years, I bet Mary remembered the circumstances of her son’s birth like it was yesterday. I bet she remembered what the shepherds had said when they arrived with word of angelic messengers singing of good news of great joy for all people, the birth of a Savior, Christ the Lord. I bet she remembered what the wise men said when they arrived with word of a mysterious star that had led them to the King of the Jews. I bet she remembered how they brought him elaborate gifts, how they bowed down and worshiped her newborn son. I bet she remembered what the angel Gabriel had said to her, nine months earlier, when he visited her to announce this startling turn of events—that she was to bear a child who would be the Son of God.

Mary was a compassionate woman. And Mary knew that her son was no ordinary man. She knew that he could do something about this impending disaster. So she turned to him and said, “They have no wine.” Perhaps there was a significant look delivered along with these understated words—we don’t know. But in any case, Mary turned to Jesus and said, essentially, “Fix it. Help them out.”

And Jesus—well, Jesus didn’t respond in the way we, let alone Mary, might have expected. Jesus responded in a way that was hardly what we would call Christ-like. He said, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” Or, in other words, “Why should I care? Too bad. That’s not my problem.”

Theologians call it “the scandal of divine reluctance.” If God is good, and the world is hurting, why would God hold back from making things right, making things new? This is the kind of question that faithful people have been asking for as long as there have been faithful people. And then there’s Jesus’ somewhat cryptic comment, “My hour is not yet come.” Commentators have done all kinds of writing about the meaning and interpretation of these issues, and they are interesting questions. But what I wonder is this: What was it that moved Jesus from, “That’s not my problem,” to a point of taking action?

Was it simply Mary’s insistence? After all, moms can be very hard to say no to.

Was it social pressure? Had someone else overheard Mary’s request so that now Jesus felt like he had to do something if he didn’t want to look like a complete jerk?

Was it the knowledge that he could, in fact, make a difference in the situation, and the nagging sense of obligation that comes with such power?
Or was it the still, small voice of God, whispering in his ear or tugging at his heart, reminding him of who he was, reminding him of the inextricable ties that connected him to every one of his sisters and brothers, reminding him that responding to suffering with “That’s not my problem” is neither true nor faithful, not ever.

What was it that moved Jesus from his all-too-human initial response to the compassionate action he later took? What made it possible for the better angels of his nature to prevail? And what will do the same for us?

There are so many situations in our world that call for compassionate responses. There are so many needs that clamor for our attention. There are so many hurts that could move our hearts to action. The plight of refugees and the threat of climate change, the persistence of racial injustice and the widening of income inequality, the continued struggle of LGBT folks and people with disabilities and elders and children, the ongoing problems of poverty and homelessness and hunger and unemployment—there is so much in this world that does not resemble the world as God intends it to be.

Whether it’s because we’ve run out of time or run out of energy, whether we think we can’t do anything that will matter or just don’t know where to begin, whether we find it too hard or too painful to engage or simply can’t keep track of it all—perhaps we can be forgiven if, from time to time, we respond as Jesus did: “That’s too bad, but it’s not my problem.”

But if we’re lucky, or if we’re listening, that initial resistance does not get the final word. Maybe it’s the insistence of our mothers. Maybe it’s the pressure of our peers. Maybe it’s a sense of obligation. Maybe it’s the still, small voice of God, whispering in our ears and tugging at our hearts, reminding us of who we are, reminding us of the inextricable ties that connect us to every one of our sisters and brothers, reminding us that responding to suffering with “That’s not my problem” is neither true nor faithful, not ever.

Because here’s the thing. God never says, “Not my problem.” God never says, “Why should I care?” God is always entering into the world in the midst of those who are oppressed, vulnerable, pushed to the margins. God cannot help but care. God is always coming into the places of disaster, the places of scarcity, the places of lack, and transforming them into places of incredible abundance. Hundreds of gallons of wine where there had been none. The finest vintage, not just two-buck chuck. A pair of nobodies off to a rough start in life transformed into the toast of the town.

God never says, “Not my problem,” because that’s just who God is. And we who are God’s children, we who are Christ’s disciples, are called to follow in this way, to feel with open hearts the hurts and hardships of the world, to feel the sufferings of others as our own—to enter into the places of disaster, the places of scarcity, the places of lack, and transform them into places of abundance, places where our sisters and brothers can know the goodness and grace, the justice and joy, that flow freely for all people from our God.

May it be so.