

January 17, 2010: SOME OTHER NAMES FOR MARRIAGE

Isaiah 62:1-5, John 2:1-11, Psalm 36:5-10

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Who *doesn't* know the parent/child power struggle in which the parent suggests an action and the child resists? Go sit with that kid no one else plays with, give great-auntie a kiss, we're spending the weekend cleaning your room. The child's response —Mo-o-o-o-o-o-m!—is often a reasoned response. Maybe it's the social suicide that goes with the outcast kid, but it can just as easily be resistance to the one-way ticket to Guilt-sylvania the parent offers. Whether you've been on the giving end or receiving end, you recognize the struggle between Jesus and his mother over a little matter of wine. Except *he's* the Son of God, and isn't God supposed to do that kind of stuff? What could it possibly cost God, who year after year turns rain into wine?

This week, in the midst of the devastation we call "Haiti," this story raises some questions. A wine emergency pales the face of Haiti's great need, a place where water is always desperately scarce, let alone fine wine, where their little-to-nothing is catastrophically even less. How do we live with a God who disregards human need? Even in the face of shifting tectonic plates, this text offers some help with that question.

The social contract between the two marriage families and their guests is what drives the story line tension. In scripture, a wedding banquet is the theological signal for transformation. John's miracles aren't about Jesus' wandering snake oil and medicine show. What we call miracles are "signs" of God's reign breaking in to human life. This one is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Translation: the old order is about to be replaced, and Jesus is better than what comes before. He *had* to resist his mother! Once he does this, everything must change.

Why does Mary force the issue? Is this what Jesus did around the house? "Honey, I've run out of sugar. Go borrow a cup from Mrs Eli next door." "Don't worry, Mom, I'll just change this sand into sugar." Maybe Mary was being theological and remembering today's psalm, which tells us that God is the source of life and abundance. One hundred eighty gallons of wedding wine translates into \$14,400 for an Oregon pinot, but the steward says this is Blue Hour-level stuff, closer to a \$108,000 value. Why in the world would God do something like this for some podunk wedding 2,000 years ago and not help the folks in Haiti? We call that kind of question "theodicy." Where is God in suffering?

That must have been the question asked by the Israelites returning from exile. What had gotten them through the exile in Babylon was the hope offered by the prophets. God's promises for their return were so extravagant that jewels were going to be part of the architecture, they were going to be top dog of all the nations and live in plenty. Yet, here they were, hungry and thirsty all the time, sick and hurt and worn out year after year, surrounded by actively hostile enemies. Where were promises being kept by this so-called steadfastly faithful God? The prophet announces, "I will not shut up! I will agitate and proclaim God's promises, until they are kept!" God made those promises of restoration, so Isaiah can pray in confidence on behalf of the nation, "God you say you are faithful, you have promised us these things, now *be who you are* and help us out!"

Mary is in that prophetic line when she does her Jewish Mother thing on Jesus. She's not concerned about timing. Here is a social crisis we can't appreciate, her compassion meter has gone off, God is supposed to be the source of abundance, so her son should take practical action. *She* might not be fully aware of it, but the in-breaking of God's reign has come. "Do what he tells you to do," is a prophet's prayer. Bring in the Salvation Army and Red Cross. Call Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and Heifer Project. Enlist Doctors Without Borders and Northwest Medical Team. Get them down to Haiti, but get them moving and active and fast. Don't let up until they make a difference. That's prayer.

I find that I have a naïve belief in the reign of God. I honestly believe that the kingdom will come, that it will be concrete and actual in the here-and-now. When we pray for it together each week, I believe we are asking God to point out ways for us to *do it* right now. The nameless servants to whom Jesus turns are told to trudge out to the town well and haul in 180 gallons of water, one

bucket at a time. What did they think was going on? “Can’t we go later in the day, when the sun’s going down, at the customary water-hauling timer?” Go get the water, fill the jars. Our lives are spent in drably dutiful tasks, hauling in the kingdom one bucket at a time. A peanut butter jar to the Food Bank, one more day at the same job (for God’s sake), another afternoon at the school hearing reading lessons, a get-well card to disabled vets you don’t even know, getting together again this week for prayer, packing hygiene kits for mission trips.

There are those who say that today’s texts point out that the spiritual journey is like a marriage. As in marriage, our spiritual journey “hits highs and lows, goes through seasons of ecstasy and ennui.” As in marriage, we find ourselves “wondering whether it’s possible to regain the passion, the conviction, the spiritual momentum [we] once enjoyed.”<sup>1</sup> Like our lives, our spiritual journeys are lived in the simple, day-to-day activities, the drably dull times. *This* is where the reign of God breaks in. Being attentive to that in-breaking means that periodically we have to take on the prophetic role of Mary and not let up on God until the need is met. It isn’t that God doesn’t see the need. Jesus must have known the wine was running out, but he apparently didn’t think it was time *for him* to do something about it. His mother felt otherwise. *This is* a scandalous story, if you only see the “divine reluctance.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus balks at helping, Mary forces his hand. Hesitation followed by extravagance. God can seem absent or inactive or uninterested in the face of need and suffering, but only God is the source of abundance and life.

In light of Haiti, this story offers comfort: Jesus *did* respond. But it was a *secret* response. The water-carrying servants were the only ones who knew they contributed to the miracle, and even they didn’t know *how* Jesus changed the water into wine. They just did what they were called to do. God’s response to human need may be hidden, requiring eyes of faith to see the mystery. Carol Lakey Hess says the invitation of this story is “to trust so much in God’s generosity and abundance that we, like the perceptive mother of Jesus, nudge God with our observation: they have no wine.” As if it makes a difference that we point God to the needs of the world. We may not be able to answer the theodicy question—where is God in suffering? But we can “keep going the conversation between heaven and earth.” And that’s what we do, one bucket at a time.

[Return to sermon page](#)

[Return to Home Page](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Renita Weems, *Feasting on the Word*.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Lakey Hess, *Feasting on the Word*, quoted by Kate Huey