

There's Something About Mary

There's something about Mary.

OK, no, get the late 90's Farrelly brothers movie out of your head, because that's not what I'm talking about here.

No, there's something about Mary in this scene from the wedding at Cana, something that keeps drawing me back to her the more I read this story.

We're in the gospel of John this week, week three of a hopscotch through several gospels that seek to highlight what Epiphany is all about. Two weeks ago we saw the kingship of Jesus revealed through a star in Matthew; last week's text from Luke drew our attention to the banks of the river as Jesus was baptized and all heaven broke loose, proclaiming him God's beloved Son.

Now we're entering a scene that seems a lot more ordinary. Jesus and his family and friends are gathered at a party, celebrating a wedding. The guests have perhaps been enjoying themselves a little too much and the hosts are out of wine. A social faux pas to be sure, but it's not really the place we'd expect Jesus to launch his public ministry. And apparently, at first he didn't think it was the right place or time, either.

But Jesus' mother—that's how she's referred to in the gospel of John, never by the name of "Mary," only as "the mother of Jesus"—has a different idea. And there's something about Mary here, something compelling about who she is and what she's doing that keeps catching my imagination.

In John, Mary only has two lines. There's no visit from the angel or singing of the Magnificat or anything like that. In this entire gospel, she says two things and the first is this:

"They have no wine."

That's it. A simple statement of fact. An observation of a need. And yet that's how the ball gets rolling. That's how Jesus' ministry gets started, by a humble woman who doesn't even get a name in this story noticing a need.

In the ancient world, wedding feasts lasted for days. And given the climate, lack of clean water, and large number of guests, the lack of wine at this wedding was a serious problem. The inability to provide what the guests needed was a failure in hospitality that would bring shame on the wedding hosts.

I imagine the servants, scuttling behind the scenes, trying to figure out what to do before anyone else realizes what's happened. The hosts and guests are oblivious as they enjoy their party, but Mary sees. Mary notices. And if John's account is accurate, then Mary notices and registers concern before Jesus does.

And when Mary notices a real human need, she knows to whom she should go. Even without angel songs or significant stars, she still knows who her son is and what he's capable of. Perhaps she didn't know what Jesus would do, or how or when he would act, but the critical issue for Mary is not what or how or when, but who.

I think there's something really informative here. Because I'll admit there are times when all I can do is what Mary does. I can see that there's a deep human need and I have no idea what to do about it, but I can speak the

need. “They have no money.” “She has no cure.” “I have no strength.” “Everything is not ok.” “They have no wine.”

And we, who perhaps have no idea what or how or when something will be done, we still know who Mary’s son is and what he’s capable of. We too can nudge God with our observation: there is a need. Mary’s observation is in so many ways a prayer, a petition, lifting up to God a place where all is not right.

And it’s lifted up with a confidence that Jesus will act. Mary does not seem bothered by Jesus’ initial hesitance on the timing of this action, his protest that it’s not *his* fault they didn’t hire a better wedding planner. She turns to the servants and says her only other words of the gospel: “Do whatever he tells you.”

Oh, there’s something about Mary. Something about her persistence, something about her trust. Not only does she believe that Jesus will do something, she inspires others to be a part of his mission. She motivates these servants, these new disciples, to follow Jesus and to act on his behalf. She doesn’t lay out a plan, she simply communicates her trust in Jesus, and invites the servants to practice obedience and faith. And in doing so, they become the people through which God’s abundance flows.

This task to which the servants were called was likely not easy. Jesus tells them to fill these huge stone jars with water, and I can only imagine how many trips to the well that took. Sometimes following God’s call means hard work on our part, without a clear sense of what’s going to happen at the end of it. But faithful obedience means we don’t need to know how to turn water into wine, we just need to be open to the work God is doing in our midst and how we can be a part of it.

And in doing so we too can see God’s glory in the middle of everyday, ordinary things. We see it in the over the top abundance—in this case with an estimated 600 bottles of wine. And this was no two buck Chuck or gallon of Gallo. It was more than they could have expected, more than they knew what to do with. And isn’t that the case with God’s grace? It comes to us more than we could expect, more than we know what to do with.

And the crazy thing is most people didn’t even realize it was Jesus who did this, only the servants. Yet somehow Mary knew that Jesus’ ministry didn’t need to be kicked off with a lot of pomp and circumstance. Because the important thing was that Jesus was there, in the midst of the people doing ordinary things. This earthy but extraordinary act of Jesus—and his mother—was a compassionate response to human need, an everyday work of wonder.

This weekend we remember Martin Luther King Jr, a man whose eloquent words, courageous deeds, and deep commitment to non-violence continues to inspire us to work for justice. I like to think he was following in footsteps of Mary: naming what’s wrong and inspiring people to follow Jesus.

And we remember his words and his actions as well as the words and actions of so many other faithful people throughout the country—men and women who marched in Selma, who sat at lunch counters and boycotted buses. They provided a compassionate response to human need, an everyday work of wonder.

Through word and deed they witnessed to the God who was bringing something better. And their witness changed our nation and our world.

But the work is not done. We have seen racism and hatred rear its ugly head time and time again, not just in the streets of Charlottesville (and DC—taunting of Native Americans), but also in our own lives, in the many ways that we cling to power structures that benefit us and try to silence those whose voices we don’t want to hear.

We too are called to everyday works of wonder, bringing compassionate responses to human need.

I mentioned there's only one other time when Mary shows up, and that's at the cross. We hear Jesus again refer to his mother as woman, as he turns to her from the cross and says, Woman, here is your son. Then he turns to his disciple, saying, here is your mother. From that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

It was a different gift of wine, that day on the cross. It was a most costly gift, one that brought with it an abundance of grace not just for a local gathering, but for the entire world. It's more than we could possibly expect, more than we know what to do with.

Yes, there's something about Mary, something that can draw us in to obedience and trust, to faithful works of wonder. And even more so, there's something about our God, who continues to show up in the midst of human life, with abundant mercy and grace, overflowing into our lives. Amen.