

“Add the Emoticon”

January 17, 2010: John 2:1-11

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Today as we continue on our journey through the season of Epiphany, we hear the story of the Wedding Feast at Cana. It is the story of Jesus turning water into wine. It is familiar to many of us if for no other reason than that the text is often read at wedding ceremonies.

Weddings in first century Palestine were big celebrations that lasted for days. This scene is a village wedding feast. In an era when the common peasantry constantly worked hard and in the face of much poverty, a wedding was a joy-filled occasion; a time to forget about the difficulties of day to day life and to feast.

Wine was essential to Jewish feasts. “Without wine,” said the rabbis, “there is no joy.” Now preachers tend to dwell on two facets of this story: the first was that the wine ran out. We know this because the text tells us that Jesus’ mother Mary goes up to him and says, “They have no wine.”

As a result of this brief phrase the common interpretation is that everyone was drunk, having consumed all the initial wine during the first few days of the celebration. Yet scholars tell us that drunkenness was a disgrace in Jewish culture. So in reality the fact that they have no wine can not indicate there was high alcohol consumption; at least not by individuals. That would have been taboo.

This is a clear example of where an over-laying 21st century assumption on biblical passages without knowing their context gets us into trouble. We do that all the time with the Bible actually, which is one reason why there is so much dissent in Christendom.

Mary’s concern is not to provide more alcohol to an inebriated crowd. What is her concern, however, is the critical component of Middle Eastern culture to provide hospitality to guests. For the provisions to run out when a person had guests in their home was bad enough. For the hosts to run out at a wedding feast would have been a disaster. So Mary’s approaching Jesus to do something about this situation was an effort to avoid such a debacle, to provide proper hospitality and to save the hosts dignity.

The second facet that preachers often focus on is the rather unusual verbal exchange between Mary and Jesus. When Mary informs Jesus that the wine has run out, he responds to her with words that we 21st century folk find off-putting and even rude. “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.”

The first thing that annoys us about this exchange is the seemingly discourteous, even derogatory use of the term woman. It seems disrespectful. God help the man who would address a woman like that here at this parish! Yet Jesus uses the term woman with some frequency in the Gospels.

In Matthew we hear the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman who is a Gentile. She comes up to Jesus at a dinner and implores him to heal her sick daughter. He answers her with an apparent insult. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” Jesus replies. In other words what I have come to offer is for the Jews and not the Gentiles. But this woman retorts quickly, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters table.” Jesus, in awe, says to her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matthew 15:21 ff)

Personally I think it is reasonable to assume that when Jesus uses the term “woman” to address a female person it is not derogatory. Instead he uses the address with affection and utters it in a gentle tone. “Woman, great is your faith.” “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?” In Jesus eyes these women are beloved.

The second thing preachers focus on in this exchange is that even though Jesus seems to deny Mary's request to help, she overrides that decision. Turning to the servants Mary tells them to do whatever Jesus tells them. In other words she expects he will remedy the imminent disaster that the lack of wine presents. Now this verbal exchange seems to indicate a meddling, over-bearing quality to Mary, which is often interpreted to mean that Mary is a stereotypical pushy Jewish mother, who thinks her son is God and can do anything.

Now while Mary was right about her son being God, I am not so sure she would fill the role of the classic pushy Jewish mother; if for no other reason than you need to be from Brooklyn to play that role. Scripture clearly tells us Mary is from Nazareth.

I think voice tone is the key to understanding today's passage, because it helps us understand the underlying emotions expressed in the words. Depending on how words are read, they can express a range of meaning. Interpreting word intentions is why those adorable little emoticons used in internet lingo help us to clarify the emotional intent of our emails.

So let's re-visit the words where Jesus says to Mary, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?"(and add a winking face emoticon, ;>). For those of you baffled as to what I am speaking of, that would be a semi-colon, a greater than sign, and a right parenthesis mark on a standard keyboard. Together these create a winking eye, a nose and a smile.

Adding this winking face emoticon to the text indicates that Jesus said these words to his mother in a playful, knowing manner. He was letting her know that of course he was going to do something to prevent the looming disaster. He was going to show all those present at that wedding feast that it was clearly his concern to be involved in alleviating bad situations, to provide hospitality and care for others in need, and to preserve the dignity of every human being.

This story is a foil told with a touch of irony. The same is true of the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman. They are meant as a teaching moments. Just as Jesus intended all along to heal the Gentile woman's daughter (of course he was going to heal the woman's daughter!), he intends to alleviate the shortage of wine.

When Jesus replies, "What concern is that to me?" what he is really conveying to Mary is that of course he is concerned and is going to get involved. We don't hear his tone of voice in the text and so we traditionally say it with a certain tone of annoyance, because we think it is annoying! We are resistant to getting involved in situations, because getting involved might inconvenience us or make us responsible for something. We prefer to mind our own business, putting blinders on our eyes and plugs in our ears to the needs of the world around us. But that's not what Jesus does . . . ever!

So adding the emoticon helps clarify Jesus. It adds a, "What are you kidding? Of course I'll get involved," message. It changes the entire dynamic and meaning. Most importantly Jesus' example of being concerned and getting involved teaches us that everything that impacts human life is to be of concern to us as well. We are to follow in Jesus footsteps.

Another woman who was beloved of Jesus died this past week. Her name was Miep Gies. You may have read about her in Connie Schultz's *Plain Dealer* column. You may also remember Miep Gies from the book, *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Miep, and her husband Jan, were two of a small group of Christian people who hid the Otto Frank family and a few other Jews in an attic hide-away in Amsterdam for over two years during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

Miep was one hundred years old - she would have 101 next month - when she died on Monday. Her life by most measures was an extraordinary one, yet she never thought so. She once said that she resisted all efforts to depict her as a hero. To idealize her, she insisted was to let off the hook those who fail to act in the face of injustice. "I don't like being called a hero because no one should ever think you have to be special to help others. I am just a very common person," she said.

In an interview with Connie Schultz some years ago, Miep told her that she helped hide the Frank family and supplied them with food and provisions in that attic hide-away as much for herself as for them. "I could anticipate the sleepless nights and the remorse I would feel later in life if I did not assist those in trouble," she said. "Remorse is far worse than any death I could have faced."

Miep Gies understood that it *was her concern* to help people being persecuted and exterminated for who they were. She knew that in the face of disaster, when human dignity was imperiled, her only true choice was to get involved and offer radical hospitality by hiding and feeding these Jewish people to try and avoid the disaster of the holocaust that faced them.

Miep was right, she was no hero, not in the sense of what the popular culture thinks is heroic, anyway. Like Martin Luther King, who we remember this weekend, and the people honored in the Choosing to Participate exhibit at the Western Reserve Historical Society, Miep was a humble person who saw injustice in the world and choose to address it. She was a child of God who knew that all of life is the concern of each and every one of us. A child of God who understood that righting wrongs and preserving human dignity is the greatest act of faith we will ever engage in.

Her life and witness tugs at our hearts and minds, reminding us that through Jesus, we are called to do the same.

Amen.