

A year or two before we got married, Jacqueline and I visited a friend's home, and we discovered magic. This friend of ours had something called a Soda Stream. You take some tap water, you put it in a plastic bottle, you attach the bottle to a nozzle, you infuse that bottle with CO<sub>2</sub>, and voila, suddenly your ordinary water is transformed into bubbly club soda. Add a lemon or lime, and it's simply divine.

Ours is now a magical household. Thanks, Bed, Bath, and Beyond! When I hear today's passage, I wonder how much a Wine Stream would cost? Something tells me it'd be in the five figures, even with one of those 20%-off coupons.

As with any great miracle story, sometimes we become SO fixated on the miraculous details of the narrative that we fail to notice what's important; we miss the forest for the miracle.

Yes, it's really, really cool that Jesus has this wine-making ability, and apparently with zero-overhead to boot. But did you notice who nudges him to action? That's right, Mary is the catalyst of our story. And did you pay attention to the wine steward? It's not just that Jesus made wine, he made really, really, really good wine. And did you pay attention to the reason(s) behind this act of compassion? In a culture steeped in hospitality, a host has run out of supplies, thereby jeopardizing their status and credibility as a trusted provider. This mishap has the potential to be a great source of shame and embarrassment for them in their community.

The actions of Mary, Jesus, and the disciples relieve the burden of their neighbors, and restore their honor and their place in community. And even better, Jesus doesn't claim credit. He lets his good works and generosity benefit both gathering and host – the community celebrates

a union, and the generous spirit of host, who despite the dulled tastebuds of their guests, saves the best wine for last.

SO many rich details in this text. Here's the one that stays with me this morning. The wine runs out. Mary notices, and informs Jesus, who promptly responds with both a question and an excuse: The question: "What concern is this to you and me?" The excuse for not acting: "My hour has not yet come."

*What concern is this to you and me?* Really, Jesus?!? Do you not know? I'm not reading his response as a rhetorical question, because the passage doesn't seem to indicate that kind of dialogue. It seems to me that it's Mary who provokes Jesus into thinking about the moment, and not the other way around. And honestly, that gives me SO much hope. This dude is the incarnate Word, he's got his own prologue, God appears in the form of a dove at his baptism, and he's even calling his own disciples, and yet he's still learning to connect the dots.

Jesus has every capacity to heal; Jesus has every ability to form substantive relationships; Jesus is equipped beyond measure to recognize human need and to identify the gifts that can meet such need. Despite all his gifts, Jesus is still in need of a community who can help him realize his potential. Jesus needs Mary to parent him, and his friends to support him.

Perhaps, in this initial moment, Jesus can recognize, as his mother Mary so rightly identifies, that the wedding feast devoid of wine is an intersection of the world's great need and his deep joy – Jesus, in this moment, can build beloved community. And yet still, there's an initial hesitation.

“It’s not yet my time,” he says. Really, Jesus? Really?!? You are thirty years old. A mighty prophet, even if he is a little weird, has anointed you, and again the baptism-and-doves thing, and disciples beginning to follow you, and the Spirit moving your thoughts, and conversations, and actions. You are totally ready, dude! All the signs are there for success. And yet, just like everyone of us, you, too, Jesus, carry a sense of anxiety and measured caution in responding to your call. Just like everyone of us, you need a parental figure to not only recognize your gifts, but to also provoke your use of them. And just like everyone of us, you need a community who believes in you and you in them.

In many ways, the last two years have felt like a banquet that’s about to run out of wine. Pandemic has robbed us of expectations, and in many instances, prevented our ability to fulfil them. Work, school, family, worship, play, you name it – every aspect of life and community has been inhibited by events beyond our control. And what exactly do you buy the happy couple when all the place settings at Belk are on backorder, and it’s not safe for them to have dinner guests anyway?

I think what happens is there’s a tendency to become disassociated dinner guests. We become so overwhelmed by the need around us, and our perceived inability to meet it, that we offer two responses: 1) What business is it of ours and 2) Our time has not yet come.

Well, Sardis, the world may have slowed down, and changed a lot in these past two years, but it hasn’t ceased to exist. The need of neighbors around us will always matter, because we are part of this world, be it virtually or physically. Being Church in 2022, that is carving out safe, accessible spaces for people to recognize and share their giftedness with the world – and doing so all while navigating pandemic, wrestling with a polarized world, adjusting to changing cultural norms,

and being mindful of safety is a daunting undertaking. There are days when it seems as audacious as turning water into wine. And besides, what business is the world's need when we're all just trying to survive?

I would argue that's the very reason Charlotte needs places like Sardis Baptist Church. There are Maries among us – people who see, support, encourage, and provoke our gifts. Sitting among us today are people who see us not as empty vessels, but instead in the light of God. Church buddies who can help end hunger; who can ease anxiety; who choose to see spiritually rather demographically; who commit themselves to making guests at the banquets, even the ones they aren't hosting, their responsibility, too! Some will inspire. Some will heal. Some will be the hands that assist. Some will be the vessels that receive. But water can and will be wine, good wine!

I think we can also resonate with the question of timing. We spent 2020 just trying to make it. We spent 2021 waiting for a resumption of normal. We enter 2022 certain of uncertainty. And we wonder, has God called us to engage the hour? If it's not even safe to hold banquets right now, how do we go about filling up wine basins? Perhaps we should just let the dust settle?

On this Martin Luther King weekend, we are reminded of his famous words – the time is always right to do what is right. I would argue that we have reached a precipice – it's time for us to use our spiritual gifts to meet the needs of the banquet in our midst.

We have gifts. We are called. And it is time. Time for us to be creative. Time for us think with new hearts and minds. Time for us to stop being so programmatic and reflexive, and time for us to start being spontaneous and Spirit-filled. We will not, I repeat, we will NOT meet

Seeing More Than Water  
Bob Stillerman  
Second Sunday After Epiphany, 1-16-2022  
John 2:1-11



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith

the needs of our neighbors by continuing to do the same old things we have always done in the same old ways in the same old time frames. The world's just not gonna let that happen, especially in the midst of pandemic.

In Acts, the Eunuch said, "There is water. Then what is to prevent me from being baptized?" In that same spirit, there (directionally) is need in our community. And this is a people full of gifts, ideas, love, and Spirit. What, I might ask, is to prevent us from meeting that need?

As Jesus learned at Cana, it's certainly not because the need isn't our business, and it's certainly not because God hasn't sent a calendar notification to get started. Jesus just needed a nudge. And so do we.

I don't think the miracle is water becoming wine. I think the miracle is all those folks who can identify the winemakers in our midst, and encourage and provoke us to action.

Our ears are open Mother Mary. May we hear your good words. And may it be today!

Amen.