

John 2:1-11

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

As John points out, this miracle is significant because it is the first. John is the only one who records this story for us. None of the other gospel writers chose to include this story. Maybe they left it out because it seems a little frivolous. In other instances, we have Jesus healing the sick, raising the dead, controlling the weather. Here all that is at stake is someone's embarrassment that they didn't order enough bubbly. So maybe the other gospel writers felt this one was a bit of a lightweight on the miracle scale.

But really, what a great way for Jesus to launch his ministry. So often, the church is referred to as the bride of Christ. We talk about the wedding supper of the Lamb when we get to heaven. So it's great to set Jesus in this context of love and joy as he is just starting out. It sets the perfect tone for what is to come.

What we're really going to be talking about this morning is prayer, specifically prayer for other people. Don't worry – it all fits with the story. But I'm curious. Does anybody else find praying difficult? Is it just me? What are some things that make it hard?

Lack of time, business
Remembering what to pray for
Same things over and over
Not knowing all the details

Feeling like God isn't answering
Knowing what to ask for

The reason I said prayer fits into this story is because Mary's approach to Jesus is good prayer in a nutshell. Their conversation is very enlightening, and I would like to think about it in the context of intercession.

Intercession is a nice churchy sounding word. You don't hear it much outside of church. And even if you could think of an example, chances are someone is borrowing the concept from something they learned in church. Intercession really means to act as somebody's advocate. You take up their cause.

Amnesty International would be a good example of a modern organization that practices intercession. At work this week I saw this ad for them.

It really hits you, doesn't it? That's an emotionally compelling message. You get a sense of the need and the urgency of it. Amnesty International is pleading the cause of those children who have no voice of their own.

In a Christian context, that is what we do as well, by coming to the Lord on behalf of another person. It's a role we're commanded to play in Scripture.

1 Tim 2:1

Urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone.

Paul goes on to say our prayer list should include our government authorities and basically the whole world. That's a big job. And it's one I'm not particularly good at. I have no problem remembering to pray passionately about my own needs, but it's much more difficult for me to give as much attention and energy to praying for other people. Prayer is work.

I'm grateful for the example Mary gives us. She is taking up the cause of someone else and bringing them to the attention of Jesus. She is interceding. The way in which she does it is very helpful for talking about how to pray for other people.

One of the most important things to note is actually subtext in the story, and it is this: Mary's request springs from her relationship to Jesus. Everything she says and does here is grounded in the fact that she is his mother. She knows him better than anyone at the wedding. Nobody else has any idea what he is capable of yet. It wouldn't even have occurred to the bride and groom to approach Jesus with this problem. Mary has a freedom and a confidence that is based on history with Jesus.

As we start to talk about praying for other people, we're talking about it in the context of an existing relationship to God. That's the first piece to make sure is in place. Being part

of God's family gives you the right to be heard and to expect an answer. If you're not in the family and you don't think of God as your Father, then you'll always be wondering, "Is God even hearing this? Why should he listen to me?" Fortunately, like we talked about on Family Sunday last month, God has the adoption papers ready to sign and we can become his children the minute we're willing to give our lives to him. He already wants the relationship. He's already made it possible. When you become his child, you can approach him with the confidence that Mary had, because you'll know that your relationship is the basis for your being able to make requests.

Jesus talked about how God answers his children's requests much the same way we answer our own.

Matt 7:9-12

"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!"

God likes to answer his children's prayers. The basis of our prayer is relationship.

Let's look at Mary's request and how she makes it. First, **she presents the need to Jesus**. She points out to him what was lacking. "They have no more wine." It is a simple statement of the problem.

She doesn't instruct Jesus. She doesn't beg him to do something. We have to remember that at this point, Jesus has never done something like turn water into wine. Mary would have had no idea how he would solve the problem, and she doesn't offer any suggestions for what he should do. She leaves the problem with him.

That makes prayer so much simpler. I don't need to come up with a plan for God. Usually I have one in mind. I almost always have an agenda that I think would be the best solution. And most of the time it isn't the best. God doesn't need me to tell him how to fix things.

There was a country song several years ago that illustrated this concept. It was called "Unanswered Prayers."

*Just the other night, a hometown football game
My wife and I ran into my old high school flame.
And as I introduced them the past came back to me,
And I couldn't help but think of the way things used to be.
She was the one that I'd wanted for all times,
And each night I'd spend praying that God would make her mine.
And if he'd only grant me this wish I wished back then
I'd never ask for anything again.*

*She wasn't quite the angel that I'd remembered in my dreams.
And I could tell that time had changed me in her eyes too, it seemed.
We tried to talk about the old days – there wasn't much we could recall.
I guess the Lord knows what he's doing after all.*

*And as she walked away and I looked at my wife,
Then and there I thanked the good Lord for the gifts in my life.*

Some of God's greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.

I can do a much better job of describing the actual need than of coming up with the best solution. It requires trust to let God have that piece of it. But his way of solving problems is so much better and more creative than we could come up with. He works in his own way and time, and all I am asked to do is keep the situation in front of him. It's not so that he'll remember. God doesn't need us writing post-it notes for him. Praying to him reminds us of who's in charge and who is helpless in the situation. It keeps us aware of our dependence on his wisdom and grace.

When we think about what kinds of needs to bring before God by way of intercessory prayer, we tend to think of the more serious issues. But as I mentioned before, the need Mary brought wasn't earth-shattering. Running out of wine wouldn't have been the end of the world. We don't need to wait for the major catastrophes in life to pray for other people. It can be the small things.

I find it helpful to think about what wine represented in this instance. In the context of this story, it symbolizes joy and celebration. In other places in Scripture, wine is talked about as making life merry. So you could say that what gave these people happiness, what brought them joy had run dry. They needed a different source of joy.

That's true for all of us at some point in life. Whatever brings us joy and happiness will not last indefinitely. And when we are praying for other people, or wondering what to pray for them, we can think about where they are needing to be infused with new joy from Jesus. Is there something robbing them of joy in their life on a big or small scale? Only he can restore it to them in a way that will last.

So Mary brings the needs of her friends to Jesus. The next thing that jumps out about her is that **she treats the need with urgency**. She doesn't wait awhile or expect somebody else to take care of the situation. As far as we know, nobody asked her to be the point person. And yet she took things in her own hands and went to Jesus.

I have found that one of the biggest hindrances to my prayer life is when I say, "I'll have to pray for that later." If I need to remember to pray for someone later, chances are I won't. And most of us are that way, even with the best intentions.

Or, if there's a need in the church, we might not devote our full attention to praying for it, because we assume that other people are picking up the slack.

Tim Vincent, the youth pastor at OSBC, has provided me with a great role model for overcoming that problem. Almost always, if you talk to him about something that you are struggling with or are challenged by, he will say, "Can I pray for you right now?" Rather than telling someone you'll be praying for them, go ahead and do it at that moment so they can be encouraged by it and you can remember to do it. That alone will often be enough to make your mind take it more seriously so you WILL remember to pray later.

I firmly believe that there is spiritual resistance to our prayers. It is one of the most important things we can do for each other and there is nothing the devil would like to do more than prevent us from being about the task.

Mary seized the moment. That's how we need to view opportunities to hold someone up in prayer.

For all this good effort, you would think she would receive an instant answer. Especially being Jesus' mother! But instead, she seems to get something pretty close to a rebuke. "My dear woman; Why do you involve me? My time has not yet come."

Talk about being put in your place. That would be enough to shut me down pretty quickly. I would take that as a definite NO.

Here's where we often have misconceptions. We'd like to look at Mary's prayer techniques and say, "If we do things this way, prayer will be easier." We'd like to think of God as being like the Genie in the lamp, and if we do things properly, he'll be right there to grant our wish.

Instead there's this initial response to Mary of, "That's not really what I had in mind." And we can face that kind of answer too. And we can take that as a no and give up.

But not Mary. **She persists.** And not in a way that contradicts what Jesus said, but in a way that shows confidence he will be able to work it out.

Everything Jesus does is in line with the will of the Father. His whole purpose is to glorify God. So when we ask for things that aren't in line with that, he will not give us what we're asking.

But look at the story. Jesus says it isn't his time. He's not quite ready to tip his hand and show the world who he is. So it would seem like that's the end of the discussion. But Mary's need is still out there. And Jesus finds a way to meet the need without compromising on his own plan. He is able to discreetly perform a miracle that only his disciples and the servants were aware of. It doesn't become the main attraction at the wedding. So Jesus accomplishes his work while at the same time answering a prayer request that seemed to be at odds with it.

Mary didn't argue with Jesus over it. She submitted to what he said and then instructed the servants to do whatever he said. What a wise approach. It didn't let go of the request, but it left it in God's hands.

When we find the answer we wanted is slow in coming, it doesn't mean we should stop asking. It may just mean that God's timing or his method will be different than ours. I don't always understand God's will and how prayer fits into it. I tend to separate it things into two categories – God's will and not God's will. But I'm so thankful that his will is big enough and his love is great enough that he can hear my requests and find a way to include it in his will. His will can wrap around and absorb our requests without compromise. That's powerful. That's a big God.

George Mueller was perhaps one of the greatest examples of intercessory prayer in the 19th century. He opened an orphanage that helped thousands of orphans, and he did it all without asking anybody but God for the support to run it. And he had incredible stories of how God always met the need, many times in unbelievable ways. Stories like having all the children sit down to the table with no food in the house, only to have a bakery truck break down outside and need to dispose of all the bread. The house was in England, and over the years, nearly \$2 million pounds were donated to his work – all without a single request for money.

But even George Mueller knew that prayer wasn't always answered quickly. He wrote,

It is not enough to begin to pray, nor to pray aright; nor is it enough to continue for a time to pray; but we must patiently, believingly continue in prayer, until we obtain an answer; and further, we have not only to continue in prayer until the end, but we have also to believe that God does hear us and will answer our prayers. Most frequently we fail in not continuing in prayer until the blessing is obtained and in not expecting the blessing.

Mary persisted until the answer came. And we can see that part of her persistence was that **she drew others into the action**. Mary's involvement of the servants is another key, because they really take over the project from this point, filling the jars, taking a sample to the master of the banquet, and so on.

When there is a serious issue for prayer, we should not hesitate to involve others in pressing it to God's ear. Sometimes God will have a role for them to play in the answer he wants to bring. Just because we're hoping for a miracle doesn't mean it won't come through human hands. It's no less the work of God that way. If the church is the body of Christ, then we are God's hands and feet here on earth. So it shouldn't surprise us if he involves us in being answers to prayer in addition to calling us to do the praying.

The servants couldn't take any credit for what happened, even though they got to be a part of the process. Nothing they did made the miracle happen. They just got a front row seat to see God at work.

One last lesson we can learn from this story is to **expect big results**. When those servants took the sample of the wine to the master of the banquet, his reaction was great. “Wow! This is the good stuff! I’m used to people bringing out the cheap wine at this point in a party. After people are sauced and they can’t tell the difference, who wastes the expensive wine on them?”

Jesus could have gotten by with a minor miracle, making some not-so-good wine. But he took it all the way. He did more than was required.

When we ask God to do a miracle in someone’s life, he’s not going to be half-hearted about answering. He’s going to exceed all expectations. If he’s going to transform somebody’s life from water to wine, he’s going to finish the job right.

I was reading a commentary this week that was probably written back during the prohibition era when it was inconceivable for any decent Christian to imbibe at all. The author went to great lengths to say that the master of the banquet in this story couldn’t possibly have been speaking literally, because Jesus and Mary would NEVER have been in a setting where people were actually inebriated.

But we know that’s EXACTLY the kind of setting we find Jesus in. He’s right in the middle of life. He doesn’t hide from us when we’re embarrassing ourselves or making the same mistake for the 1000th time or being self destructive. He doesn’t shield his eyes when we’re showing our humanity. He has to be a guest at the wedding, otherwise there’s no hope for us. There will be no one close enough to turn to in our hour of need.

Hopefully we’ll accompany him to all the weddings, the events and places in life where we will bump elbows with people who are running out of joy. And hopefully we’ll be like Mary, quickly running to him and saying, “They have no more wine.” Jesus is ready to respond, ready to transform another life from ordinary water into extraordinary wine – a source of joy and celebration.

Some of us today are feeling like we’re running on empty. And some of us have people who are on our hearts that we want to pray for. We want to carve out a time for that to happen this morning. Derek’s going to lead us in a closing song, and while he does, if you would like to be prayed for, just come up to the front. If you have somebody you want to spend a moment praying for, you come up to the front too. And if you see somebody come up and you want to pray for them, you come up too. We will just close our time together by doing a little intercession right here and now, pleading people’s case before God.

He’s here. Let’s ask him for what we need.