

“Doing Our Part”
John 2:1-11

Years ago, I heard the tale of a country preacher who was walking down the road and came upon a dead mule that had been hit by a truck. He recognized the animal and walked to the owner’s house to share the news and express his regrets. The owner said, “Well, it is the custom around here for persons who find something like that to take responsibility for burying it.” “All right,” the preacher answered “but I just thought I’d notify the next of kin.” (citation lost)

For all of us there are moments when a need arises and we appropriately respond. The circumstances will vary widely, of course, but sometimes, despite doing our best others choose not to cooperate. Yet then there are times like the one we read about in John’s gospel, when in the face of a problem, someone acts and events move ahead in a wonderful direction.

Those verses recall a first century wedding in the community of Cana. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was present as were her son and his disciples. In those days, a wedding celebration lasted for days and it was as part of that kind of extended reception that the host ran out of wine. When Mary hears the news, she turns to Jesus and says, “They have no wine.” Now to us, those words could sound like nothing more than casual conversation or even a word of sympathy for the host, but Jesus clearly hears a different tone and knows she wants him to act.

His response reveals that he knows she is not suggesting he go and buy wine either as he responds “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” Mary doesn’t answer him, but instead turns to the servants and says, “Do whatever he tells you.” Jesus instructs them to fill six stone jars with water. John tell us that each of those jars could hold 20-30 gallons of water and after they complete the task, Jesus says, “Now draw some out and take it to the chief steward.” The servants do so, and without knowing the source of what is now wine, the steward tastes it and calls over the groom to praise him. John concludes, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

Over the centuries, there have been many interpretations of that scene. Some hear in it echoes of the Lord’s Supper or the first use of wedding banquet imagery Jesus will call upon later to speak of his return at the Second Coming. Others view those events as a reminder of the abundant nature of God’s response in our lives; that just as 180 gallons of wine would have been much more than what was required at a wedding reception so does God provide us with far more than we need or could imagine. Still others have focused upon how Jesus told his mother “My hour has not yet come” proclaiming to her and us that events best unfold in God’s timing.

Such lessons are among the many faithful ones that we can draw from that account, yet I was taken by the exchange between son and mother. Much of the attention in commentaries focuses on Jesus’ response of “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me” and efforts to make it sound less harsh. Some scholars, for instance, tell us that calling her “woman” was not cold, but a term of endearment noting that three years later from the cross he will say to her “Woman, here is your son,” placing Mary into the care of the beloved disciple. Others note that his words of “what concern is that to you and to me?” was a Jewish idiom of the era meaning that the lack of wine was not his problem, much as one might say “That’s no skin off my nose.”

Yet whatever Jesus’ tone of voice, it’s Mary’s response that stands out to me for after hearing his words she turns to the servants and elicits their help. Did she know what Jesus was going to do? I don’t think so. There is no Scriptural record of such power before this scene. There is no reason to believe Mary knew a miracle was coming, but she knew him. She knew his

character and unique calling and thus was confident that he would respond in some way. Mary had done her part in bringing the need to his attention. The next step was up to him.

I find that a helpful word for the challenging moments we face. The circumstances vary widely, from interpersonal struggles to difficulties at school, a troubling diagnosis to unhappy clients, community challenges to worldwide pandemics. The situations we face can be more or less significant than the one Mary brought to Jesus' awareness, but her action suggests that we often have a part to play in any resolution, too. It may be bringing the challenge to the attention of someone who can correct the problem or resolving to make a change in ourselves. It could be gathering others together to brainstorm possibilities or turning to God in prayer. Whatever forms it takes, the solution often begins when like the mother of Jesus, we simply do our part.

I'm sure many of you recall the images from several weeks ago of stranded vehicles on Interstate 95. A heavy and quickly-accumulating snowfall resulted in a 50-mile backup south of Washington, D.C. leaving motorists, including a U.S. Senator, stuck in their car for 24 hours. While most articles at the time and afterwards that focused on how it happened and how to prevent it from re-occurring, I was drawn the story of one couple who were caught in that mess.

"Casey Holihan and her husband, John Noe had been stranded for about 16 hours," a journalist wrote, "when they got an idea. The couple spotted a Schmidt Baking Company truck just a few cars ahead of them...At that point, they estimated, it had been approximately 37 hours since they had last eaten. 'We were starving,' said Holihan, 'People around us were very much struggling as well. We could hear kids crying.'" So, they called the Baltimore company hoping it would be willing to offer whatever products were on the truck to hungry travelers. They reached the customer service line and left their phone number with a representative. 'I didn't think it would actually work,' Holihan said. "What happened next stunned her.

"Just 20 minutes later, Chuck Paterakis, one of the owners...called the couple directly. He advised them to go to the truck, then instructed the driver to offer up two products—one package of rolls and one loaf of bread—to any person who wanted them...Along with the truck driver, Ron Hill, Holihan and Noe started grabbing loaves of bread off the truck and distributing them to the surrounding vehicles. Others swiftly joined their efforts. 'We started going door to door and we got to help a lot of people,' Holihan said, handed out about 300 packages of bread.

"She heard stories from families with young children who were stuck with no food for hours on end. Although spending an entire night on a highway was scary and stressful for everyone, by morning [Holihan] added, "'We developed a tiny little community that won't be quickly forgotten.' To them, Paterakis's generous gesture was the most memorable part of an otherwise awful experience. "He didn't have to help us. He could have made a profit off that bread. It was really heartwarming."

When contacted, the owner explained his decision in this way. "As a family-run bakery with an 80-year history, 'we're humbled and grateful that we could help,' said Paterakis, adding that his parents opened their first bakery in 1943 in Baltimore. Now, he and his three brothers own the company. Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic [it] has donated close to 3 million loaves of bread to people in need in the Baltimore-Washington area. "My father and mother taught us how to work hard and give back to the community," he said. "My parents would be very proud." (Page, Sydney "Drivers were stuck on I-95 when one saw a bakery truck. Soon, stranded motorists were breaking bread together," www.washingtonpost.com, January 4, 2022)

Doing our part may not result in hundreds being fed or water being transformed into wine. Yet on this day, we need not worry about the outcome, but instead only act in the way that seems best to us and then let events unfold from there.