Married to Amazement\*

*\*from Mary Oliver’s “When Death Comes”*

A meditation on John 2: 1- 11

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church January 20, 2019

The poet Mary Oliver died this past Thursday. She wrote lines such these:

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.* *Wild Geese*

Or this, from *The Summer Day:*

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

And these, from *When Death Comes:*

*When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

“A bride married to amazement,” “a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.”

Oliver takes that moment that is typically so brief, those few hours out of one’s lifetime when one stands at the threshold of marriage, and suggests that it is possible to live a lifetime filled with *that* hope, with *that* sense of wonder. Oliver believes that it is possible to live every day with *that* intensity of anticipation and expectation.

The quirky “I’m going to do things my own way” gospel writer John launches Jesus’ ministry *at a wedding*, and I wonder if the author hoped this context might inspire in us the same sense of anticipation and expectation known by a bride or groom. Jesus is not the rabbi, not the officiant. Jesus is a *guest*, one of many. And his “plus one”? His mother! How sweet is that! His disciples are there, too. And we are also invited to this celebration; we are invited to sit beside Jesus, that we might *take the world into our arms.* We are invited to attend, and to be witnesses to, this mysterious, “behind the scenes” miracle.

Had Jesus wanted to draw attention to himself, he could have easily done so. He could have asked a servant to hand him a pitcher of fresh water and then proceeded to pour rich wine into the goblets on the table while everyone said, “ooh,” and “aah” and “how did he do that?” But he did not. This was not a miracle to prove his power, or to frighten anyone into believing in him. He didn’t do it to dazzle anyone or to gain popularity, or to convince his disciples. It looks like he did it because his mother put him on the spot. No good Jewish son is going to let down his mother in public! What he does is a bit magical, but if Jesus were simply a magician, this scene would beg us to imagine the kinds of things his mother might have pushed him to do back home. “Jesus, honey, I need you to do something with those two fish…I forgot you were bringing *all* your teenage friends home for supper!”

Jesus is not a magician, and his mother would not be asking him to employ his power just to keep the wine flowing. This sign which Jesus performs, like the miracles of healing and feeding, is a sign of compassion. It seems like a funny little miracle at first. Like Jesus is still learning, a “training wheels” kind of miracle. In comparison, we remember: a young child is brought back from death’s door, a man who was paralyzed can walk, the one who was blind can see, a ravenous multitude is fed, Jesus walks across stormy water to get to his friends, and Lazarus is given back his life. After three days in a stinking tomb! In comparison, turning water to wine seems… silly. Had he not done it so secretively, it would seem showy. It makes us feel like we have to defend him and justify the sign. So we look for the symbolism.

In the commentary *Texts for Preaching*, the authors acknowledge the enticing elements in the story: a wedding banquet, water, and wine, elements we encounter frequently throughout scripture. The prophets speak of God loving Israel as a bridegroom, and the New Testament writers speak of Jesus as the bridegroom of the church. Water and wine represent life, sacred and precious. But before we get immersed in trying to identify each possible metaphor of this story, these authors suggest that,

*Instead of looking at the story as a puzzle to be solved, we might regard the elusive, vexatious, enigmatic character of the story as one of its primary functions. As the “first of his signs,” the Cana miracle points ahead toward the mysterious story that is unfolding. It warns us that this gospel does not play by the rules of our expectations. (Texts for Preaching, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 111)*

As Gospel allegory, it is perfect. They didn’t *need* the quantity of wine he gave them. It wasn’t just enough for the remainder of the multi-day celebration, it was enough for the village to enjoy for days to come. As messianic symbol it is perfect: scarcity replaced with abundance, something made from nothing. Waters of purification transformed into the wine of celebration. At a wedding. An ordinary, everyday wedding. Not a royal wedding or a political wedding. Just an ordinary, everyday marriage of a young village couple. Theologian Karoline Lewis refers to this as the “epiphany of abundance.” It is a silly miracle so that we will never forget the joy at the heart of God’s realm, a joy which can only exist in the midst of peace for all people.

In John’s Gospel, our first encounter with Jesus as minister and savior, as healer and restorer of hope, is in an act of compassionate abundance. It is the wastefulness of wine, which makes us uncomfortable. We *want* his first miracle to be a healing, to be a restoration, a feeding. But in John’s version of the good news, *Jesus’ first public sign is at a party and he makes wine.*

*The gifts of Jesus extend well beyond the needs of the moment for health, or safety or food. In this story, those gifts encompass the celebration of life itself…the sheer abundance of the gifts Jesus brings to humankind extends beyond what any human being can ask or think or comprehend.* (Texts for Preaching, p. 111)

And though it would be enough to say we will attempt to grasp the enormity of this sign, to simply live with the mystery, there is one detail we should not ignore. *Someone* had to name what was happening and *someone* had to take that need to Jesus. And that someone was Jesus’ mother. Mary serves as an intercessor, expressing the human need for Jesus to restore abundance. She does not tell him what to do; she takes the problem to him and trusts him to respond. Jesus does not force himself upon the situation, he waits for the invitation.

Notice Mary’s wisdom; notice Mary’s awareness. Others may have known the wine was running out, but it was *Mary* who took the problem to Jesus and placed it in his hands. It was *Mary* who trusted him to respond. It was *Mary* who raised her voice on behalf of the young and vulnerable couple.

Who will be the Mary in our midst? Who will be the one to name the scarcity, to name the injustice, to name the brokenness? Who will name it and seek a response? We read this story and it all seems to have happened so easily. Water to wine in the blink of an eye. But there was much laboring behind this miracle. Six water jars, each with a capacity of twenty to thirty gallons, take time to fill. Imagine how many buckets of water had to be raised from the well, carried to the house. One gallon of water weighs 8.34 pounds. That’s somewhere in the neighborhood of 1,231 pounds of water that had to be transferred from well to jar. Not a terrible job if shared by many hands, if borne by strong shoulders. And in the meantime, there were those who were waiting, waiting and wondering, “Where is the wine?”

We labor with God to make God’s abundance a reality. We need the “Marys” who observe and name what needs to be fixed. We need the hands that will labor so that God’s miracles may take place, so that God’s abundance can be known. We need those who spread the message of hope that “the wine is coming, but may take time.” We need all of these participants, co-creators, who place the water jars at God’s feet so that God’s transformative work may happen. So that all might have the opportunity to live a life “married to amazement” rather than “married to despair.”

Tomorrow we will remember the preacher and activist, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who believed in the abundance which Jesus proclaimed with every breath, every word, every action, every sign. We will remember Rev. King, and so many other “Marys” who recognize that the wine of understanding, the wine of compassion, the wine of abundance has not been offered to everyone. We will remember those who suffered abuse and persecution, and continue to suffer, simply to be recognized as God’s children.

Tomorrow, Grace will participate in the Unity Day March, and I would love to see a strong turn out from our community. Marching may not seem like much. But marching is a witness. As when Jesus was a guest at a wedding, it is the offering of presence, the gift of time, the gift of awareness. Isn’t awareness where it all begins? If we truly want to know how to live, we must look to Jesus. He was fully present in the everyday, ordinary experiences: sharing a meal, drinking from a well, fishing with friends, worshiping at the Temple, going to a wedding, talking with strangers while walking the road together. You never know when you may be witness to a miracle. You never know when you might have an opportunity to “take the world into [your] arms.

Thanks be to God, who loves us with an abundance beyond our limitations and beyond all imagining. Thanks be to God, who invites us to be “married to amazement.” Amen.