

There's something about Mary, and I am not talking about the 1998 romantic comedy with that title. I'm talking about our Gospel reading for today, where Mary, Jesus' mother, appears in the first sentence. This placement does more than simply tell us her location at the beginning of a story, it tells us she is an important part of what is about to happen.

We need to remember this morning's Gospel reading comes from the Gospel according to John and that each of the four Gospels in the New Testament have distinct differences. Biblical scholars believe John's Gospel was written years after Mark, Luke, and Matthew's Gospels. Each Gospel is more than one disciple's memory of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. They are influenced by the theology and practice of what became the Christian religion in the communities they originated in.

Take, for example, Mary, the mother of Jesus. In Luke's Gospel, which we heard during Advent and Christmas, the author described Mary's obedience to God through her willingness to give birth to Jesus even though she wasn't married. And we got to hear her powerful song, the Magnificat, which can still make the rich and powerful nervous while inspiring hope in those who feel no matter how hard they work they will never be free from the oppression of the rich and powerful.

Today, we encounter Mary through the lens of John's community. The Gospel of John does not record the birth of Jesus like Luke or Matthew. Instead, we get John's eloquent words about the Word becoming flesh and dwelling with us, a light the darkness can never extinguish. This is the first time we see Mary in John's Gospel. She isn't quietly pondering the miracle of Jesus' birth or singing songs of praise to God, but that doesn't mean she doesn't play an important role in Jesus' life. The author of John sees her as vital as the other Gospel writers, it's just expressed differently. Probably because of the uniqueness of their community.

Although she was referred to as Jesus' mother in the first sentence of the Gospel, that isn't how Jesus treated her. For those of us in the West, this has often gotten in the way of seeing what is going on in this section of John's Gospel. We like to think of relationships between children and parents, especially between mother and son as something that takes priority over everything else. So, when Mary brought her observation to Jesus and he responded by calling her

“woman” instead of “mother” or “mom”, it can grate against our sensitivities and plenty of Western theologians have written pages and pages trying to comfort us, assuring us Jesus was not being rude or disrespectful.

If we can look beyond the mother son relationship, are open to a definition of the term “woman” as one that isn’t degrading, and look at the Gospel itself, we’d see it is the habit of Jesus to refer to all females, no matter his relationship with them, as “woman”. That’s how he addressed Mary Magdalene, it’s how he addressed the Samaritan woman at the well, and it is how he addressed his mother at the cross. So maybe that means Jesus was using the term “woman” differently than we modern people do. Maybe it was a term indicating respect. Like that of an equal or a leader.

There is quite a lot of scholarly and archeological evidence that women were leaders in the early church – remember the early church is how we refer to the followers of Jesus in the first several hundred years after his resurrection and ascension. There is such strong evidence women were leaders in the early church some of it is in the form of graffiti or destruction to early Christian mosaics or art depicting women in leadership roles, and shows some people found it offensive.

When we consider the author of John’s Gospel worked with women as leaders, Jesus’ form of addressing women as such is not so uncomfortable. It can even reveal to us what is going on in today’s scripture reading and help us see what we might not have seen before, even if we have read it before.

This brings us back to Mary and reveals her behavior was not some toxic passive aggressive power game of a mother trying to control her son. Now it looks like Mary was leading Jesus to his ministry.

That Mary and Jesus were at a wedding is not just a setting for the story. Weddings and banquets were symbolic terms used to describe the Messianic age and suggest when the Messiah came, life would be like a magnificent wedding feast. The wedding of course is the coming together of heaven and earth. It will be a joyful union.

However, there was a problem at this wedding in Cana. The person who noticed the problem is Mary. She worded the problem as, “They have no wine.” It can be tempting to see this literally as a supply problem. But there is most likely more to it. You might be familiar with historians and scholars describing weddings in the days of Jesus as big events that lasted a week. Weddings were not family affairs; they were for the whole community. Everyone took off work, shops were closed, and everyone brought food and drink to the celebration, sort of like a big potluck. As you might imagine, the wealth of the people in the community translated into the wedding feast. Cana was a poor community. Which means

when the wine ran out, it was not because people were taking too much or didn't bring anything because they didn't support the couple, it was probably an indication that the community was suffering scarcity. Perhaps from poor harvest or from heavy taxes of Rome.

Once again, we see Mary standing with the poor and bringing attention to the suffering oppression brings. It must have been one of her defining characteristics and why so many people still feel drawn to her today. Mary noticed the reality of the situation and brought it to Jesus. She didn't tell him what to do, she told him what she saw.

When Jesus asked what that had to do with him and her, she didn't respond with a debate. He said his hour had not yet come, but perhaps Mary saw things differently, maybe she saw things through the lens of hope. We don't know for sure because she led with her actions and instructed the servants to do what Jesus told them. This gave Jesus freedom to respond however he wanted to the problem.

Notice what Jesus did not do. Jesus did not give everyone at the wedding a million dollars. Jesus did not destroy Rome or make a rule that said they could not tax people. Jesus did not tell everyone the wedding was over and to go home. Jesus did not do something practical. He did something ridiculously extravagant by turning hundreds of gallons of water into wine. The socially justice minded among us might be quick to point out Jesus did not fix the problem of poverty for that community. Instead, Jesus did something that pointed to salvation, to heaven and earth coming together in him.

Wine was a symbol of joy in antiquity and such an abundance of wine points to the promise of the Old Testament prophets indicating the Messiah is at work in the world. In the spirit of the season of Epiphany, Jesus was revealed as not just another wedding guest with his friends, he is God with us.

Would Jesus have acted if Mary hadn't brought what she noticed to his attention? We don't know. But because she did, the author of John's Gospel tells us Jesus did something that not only started his ministry, it pointed to the nature of his ministry. Jesus didn't come to be with humanity to fix our problems and make the world what we want it to be, Jesus came to restore the relationship between humanity and God. We also heard this miracle made the disciples believe in Jesus. All because of Mary.

There's something about the mother of Jesus. In John's Gospel she won't be mentioned again until she is at the foot of the cross, perhaps suggesting she was with him all along. Other gospels portray her differently, and I am not trying to make those Gospels conform to this one. Today, we are given a mother who

did not rely on her parental relationship to initiate Jesus' ministry. We see a leader who was not afraid to look away from a difficult situation, who paid attention, and brought what she noticed to Jesus.

She is a model for all of us who follow Jesus today. I know it can be exhausting to pay attention these days. There doesn't seem to be much in the way of good news and every time we think the pandemic is about to ease up it cycles back to surges indicating a high spread. It can be tempting to pretend it isn't happening. I read an article that says Americans are done with the pandemic, even though it is obviously not done with us. Especially as the pandemic is revealing other things that had become easy to ignore: the growing disparity between the haves and have nots when it comes to employment, education access, medical care, even the ability to rest. It can be overwhelming.

When overwhelmed, it can be tempting to long for the past to come and save us, to bring back whatever gave us comfort. But the past is not our savior. Jesus is. No matter what is happening around us or to us, the past won't fix or heal or help us. We can face reality, not with despair, but like Mary shows us, with hope. Hope that begins with Jesus. Jesus may not magically fix the world the way we want him to, but that is okay. He is up to something better, something ridiculously extravagant like resurrection life. And when we can let go of the past and look with hope to Christ, we can begin to hear again what the Holy Spirit is calling us to in this time, leading us as individuals and as a parish deeper into new life in Christ and reveal his way of love to the world.

There is something about Mary for all of us today.