

**2 Epiphany C January 20, 2018**  
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**Instructions for Living Life**  
**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

Perhaps you have heard the news that Mary Oliver died a few days ago. For those unfamiliar with her, Mary Oliver was a prolific poet who has been called the best-selling poet in America and has received many awards and prizes, most notably the Pulitzer Prize in 1984. She was born and raised in Maple Heights, Ohio, just outside of Cleveland. In an interview, she said that she loved the beauty of the natural world around her and often retreated there when things got difficult, especially growing up in a home she called dysfunctional. She also spoke about how writing helped her connect with the beauty of the natural world, with life, and helped her understand and heal from the traumas that can be part of life. Maybe one reason her poetry has such a wide appeal is because of her ability to articulate so well simple beauty, the reality of fear and pain, the hope that comes from healing, and the joy that living when you are connected to something larger than yourself can bring. Certainly, she will be missed. But like all artists, while the poet may be gone, her words remain with us, continuing to inspire and encourage and connect.

Like the words from a poem she wrote called "Sometimes". Inside that lovely poem she included this bit called "Instructions for living life. Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it." Those instructions remind me of the days when I worked with an Episcopal ministry that focuses on whole person wellness, as we often talked about the importance of paying attention - because life is more than biology; of consuming, respiration, and reproduction and finding an economic way to support that biology. And to find out what life is about, a person has to pay attention, sometimes even to what they pay attention to.

Just like another Mary in today's Gospel lesson. There is a lot going on in this Gospel lesson and a lot of people involved, making it a challenge to pay attention. Not just for those of us reading or hearing this Gospel this morning, it was just as hard for those who are in the Gospel account. If you look closely at the start of the Gospel, none of the people we might expect were paying attention. Jesus certainly wasn't. Neither were his disciples. The only person who seemed to notice and made the observation that the wine was gone before the party was over was the mother of Jesus. And she told her son what she noticed.

There has been a lot of commentary written about the exchange between Jesus and his mother in this story. Even historians have jumped in and tried to sooth our modern 21<sup>st</sup> Century sensitives to what sounds like some disrespect from Jesus when he responded to his mother's observation. Lots of well-educated people want to assure us Jesus was NOT being disrespectful to his mother.

But I wonder if we sell ourselves short when we work so hard to make something – whether it is the Gospels, or a novel, or a short story, or a poem – that was written in another time try to fit our modern understanding of what is and is not correct or appropriate instead of letting the text show us what is there. When I look at the exchange between Mary and Jesus, I don't see a mother telling her teenager to do a chore the teenager has neglected or to jump in help instead of sitting there, like most mothers and step mothers. Instead I see a different kind of relationship, one that looks more like partners in a business or ministry. It looks more equitable. Mary isn't telling Jesus what to do as much as she told him what she noticed. He responded not by whining that it isn't his problem, but by reminding Mary of something theological: his hour has not yet arrived.

John's Gospel is full of such statements. Like at the beginning of the Gospel lesson when we read and heard all this took place on the third day. Scholars assure us the author of John is not talking the third day of the week. Instead, this is a reference to the resurrection. Remember, this and all the Gospels were written down long after the actual events took place, and through the Gospels the authors are showing us the life of Jesus through the lens of his death and resurrection and the new life that resurrection brings with it for us when we are paying attention and notice it. It's the author's way of saying to us: be on lookout for the resurrection, the kingdom of God is going to show up in this story.

And it seems the person who saw the opportunity for that resurrection moment was Jesus' mother. Which is why Jesus' response is not a slap in the face to his beloved mother. It is a theological statement that says he hasn't risen from the dead yet. But Mary is not theologically ignorant. In fact, she seems to be well read when it comes to Old Testament prophets like Isaiah who wrote in the first lesson we heard this morning about God saving God's people from desolation and giving them the new name of Delight in a way that will be as joyful and beautiful as a wedding. Which Mary seemed to have recognized. So here we have Jesus and Mary and the disciples in the middle of wedding ceremony when the old villain scarcity reared its ugly head when the wine ran out.

We need to remember there is a lot of symbolism in John's Gospel, symbolism that is not necessarily true for every individual in every circumstance. Like wine. For people who have addictions to alcohol, wine is not necessarily a symbol of joy and abundance, nor for people who may have family members suffering from such an addiction. But if we let ourselves get distracted by that, then we miss out on a miracle, the real miracle. Because it might be helpful to imagine wine as something else that symbolizes joy or connection.

For a wedding at Jesus' time, the wine and food were an essential part of the celebration which lasted for days, not hours. Running out of anything before the celebration ended was significant. It wasn't just embarrassing and might not have been a mistake of poor planning. It may have been a sign the community was not supporting this marriage. I remember reading several years ago about the custom of the time and place that when there was a wedding, the entire community was invited to the celebration, the whole town would shut down so everyone could participate, and the entire community would support the celebration by providing the food and drinks. Running out of something could therefore indicate the community failed to support or participate in the celebration and perhaps disapproved of the new couple and their families. The running out of something signaled a problem deeper than poor management. Which might explain why Mary's observation brought about Jesus' theological response rather than a practical one. Mary was noticing the deeper problem, the way humanity falls short of being the Beloved Community – to use a phrase from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And Jesus responded by saying it was not time for resurrection yet, for it is in that amazing wondrous mystery that sin is defeated, and God's Kingdom became part of living life. Yet Mary seems to know there is more to salvation, that there needs to be ways to show what resurrection is and what that new life means, and how to recognize God's Kingdom when we see it so we can engage in it.

Which may be why Mary told the servants to do whatever Jesus said. And of course, we know the rest: Jesus told them to get to work, filling jars with water. Again, the religiously astute among us will notice – if they are paying attention- that the jars are from the Old Testament. Used for purification rites, used to ritually cleanse oneself of sin and wrongdoing so one can participate in religious ceremonies, and be more acceptable to God. Which means turning that particular water into wine is the stuff of resurrection life and symbolizes a change in humanity's relationship with God.

And there is something deeper going on behind that powerful symbolism. There is a miracle. And I am not talking about water being turned into wine. I am talking about resurrection life. I am talking about the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community actually happening. And it is hard to see it – if we aren't paying attention. You see, all that water and all that wine can be distracting. There is rather a lot of it; gallons and

gallons. So one can get distracted figuring out the time it would take the servants to fetch and carry that much water to fill those particular jars as these were the days before indoor plumbing. We can assume there was no facet nearby. All that water and all that wine show abundance. A lot. And I heard a preacher say she has never experienced a miracle of abundance like that - where it just appeared out of nowhere - in her life. But I bet she has, she just wasn't paying attention. Because I have. And so have all of you. If you haven't, you will in little while when you experience Holy Communion. In Holy Communion there is the same kind of miracle: transformation. Wafers become the Body of Christ and Wine his blood. But it isn't something that happens in isolation, it is a mystery we all participate in and work together to make happen with God.

The way I see it, the moment Jesus turned water into wine is the moment the wedding at Cana became a liturgy. Liturgy is a word that does not mean a performance by a priest. Liturgy is a word that means the work of the people. If you look at our worship service today and every Sunday, every bit of it is a work of the people. From the vestments and vessels that were made or given to the church, the people who set the books for the people who read the lessons, the people who set the altar, buy the wafers and wine, clean the chalices, paten, bread boxes, linens – which require special care – the people who carry the crosses and assist the priest in preparing the elements and distributing the sacraments, the people who carry the elements. And that is not all. There are the people who provide music, who sing, and pray, and listen because that's all part of it too. And in the midst of this work we all do together, God is Present, just like Jesus was present at the wedding and shows that Presence by transforming one thing into the very thing that is needed most. For the wedding it was the good wine. For Holy Communion it is the sacrament. The point is: the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community is a result of the resurrection life that is God and humanity working together to make God's dream for humanity a reality. That was the miracle at a wedding in Cana. Which is what astonished not just the steward who tasted that good wine, it astonished Jesus' disciples and led them to believe in him. Which is the second part of Mary Oliver's poem about how to live life. Be astonished. And the last part, tell about it, well, that is what the author of John's Gospel did.

And we can too. Kingdom of God miracles do happen. Not just in Holy Communion, they can happen in so many ways, but sometimes I wonder if we miss them because we weren't pay attention. One of the benefits of attending church services is to learn to pay attention – not to misspelled words in the bulletin or what someone is wearing – but to the ways God is Present, to the moments resurrection life bursts through despair or scarcity through our combined generosity and working with each other and God to produce something as astonishing as God's Kingdom, Dr. King's Beloved Community, right here in our midst. So that we can recognize it when we need

to step into it when we see it in other places. And delight in feeling astonished. And tell about it. We can't ever forget there are so many people telling about the problems and injustices of the world; imagine how things might change if we started sharing our joy and astonishment when we see and touch and participate in the resurrection, in God's Kingdom, the Beloved Community, and the hope and joy that comes with it. Perhaps Mary Oliver's instructions for living life aren't for living just any life – they are how we live a Christ-centered Love of God Kingdom of Heaven life here on earth.