

I did a wedding this past Friday afternoon in my living room. Two men phoned me last month to see if I would marry them. They wanted a pastor to tie the sacred knot, but apparently had a difficult time finding one to perform the ceremony.

I said, "Come to my house and bring two witnesses, because my wife is at work and my dogs can't write their names yet."

Our dogs are certainly old enough, but their lack of a thumb, that all-important opposable digit, has been a real stumbling block in their literary development. Plus, I had to put the dogs in the garage during the wedding because they've behaved terribly at every wedding I have ever taken them to.

So the couple came, and their parents with them, and we gathered in the living room and said the words that bound them to one another. It was a happy afternoon. I thought of this Scripture and remembered that a dinner guest had given us a bottle of wine several years ago, which we had put in the cabinet over the refrigerator. I went to get it after the wedding to toast their marriage, but it was gone. Joan said she didn't drink it, which left the dogs, and I don't put it past them. I could hear them whooping it up out in the garage. I never should have taught them to read the Bible.

The wedding feast at Cana is often described as the first miracle of Jesus, if we don't count the miracles described in the apocryphal gospels that didn't make it into the Bible. An odd little story of Jesus cursing a boy and the boy dying and his parents falling blind, and a story of Jesus making sparrows out of clay. But the first miracle in the Bible attributed to Jesus is turning water into wine in John's gospel.

The wedding couple ran out of wine, Mary asked Jesus to do something about it. Jesus objected, saying he wasn't ready to do something like this. "My time has not yet come." His ever-confident Jewish mother assured him he could do it. "Oh, sure, you're ready" and tells the servants to do anything he asks of them.

First, let me say this. The Bible is a living text. These aren't dry, dusty words chiseled in stone. They're alive, they're elastic, they have life in them, and sometimes things go unsaid and unwritten, so we have to fill in the blanks, based on what we know about human nature and Jewish history. And we have to do that with this story, because there are some holes in the story. For instance, why was Jesus at the wedding? Men never go to weddings voluntarily. They go because someone they love has asked them to go. Jesus is at the wedding because Mary wanted him there, perhaps to meet a nice girl, so he went, but he brought his buddies. Could a man do anything worse? Probably not.

So his mother is a little put out with him, and when they run out of wine, she says, “Make yourself useful. If you’re not going to get married and give me grandchildren, at least make yourself useful.” As I said, I might be reading a bit much into this, but maybe not. We know something happened, something was said, because Jesus has an obvious change of heart. At first, he won’t do it, he says it isn’t the time and place, that his hour has not yet come, then the next thing you know he’s giving instructions to the servants and changing water into wine.

Why the change of heart?

I think it’s because he had decided what was most important. Whenever we see Jesus struggle with a decision, it was typically a decision between two good things. It was seldom a decision between an obviously bad thing and an obviously good thing. In this wedding story, he had to choose between two good things—whether he would obey his sense of leading, which was telling him, “Now is not your time,” or whether he would act to preserve the dignity of another person.

In the world of Jesus, hospitality was pre-eminent. When someone was your guest, they were served the finest food and drink you had. They came under the umbrella of your generosity and protection. Your reputation and dignity were at stake.

So the wedding couple and their families were in the horribly embarrassing position of not being able to adequately provide for their guests. We can't begin to imagine the embarrassment they would have felt, the loss of dignity they would have suffered in not providing amply for their guests. When dignity is all you have, if you are poor, if you are of low estate, and dignity is all you have, then the loss of dignity is everything.

Mary, of course, knew this, was concerned for the families, and asked Jesus to do something about it in order to prevent their loss of dignity. Jesus said, "It's not my time." Mary presses him, forcing him to make a choice. Should he follow his sense of leading, his sense of God's will, or should he preserve the dignity of this couple and their families? Both are good things, desirable things. In the end, of course, Jesus went with dignity.

Why do you suppose he did that? Because he realized a great truth. That any choice we make that robs someone of their human dignity isn't the right choice. Any choice that makes another person feel less than human, that leads to the diminishment of another person, is the wrong choice. That's what this story is about. It's a great *Aha!* moment for Jesus, compliments of his mother, at the very start of his adult life. A timely lesson. It is always the right time to protect the dignity of another person.

You know, these folks who are opposed to marriage equality, who stand at their annual church conferences and denounce it as evil, who write their legislators, who get these dreadful laws and rules passed that rob others of their happiness and dignity, they've never had to explain to two people who love one another why they can't marry. I did that once years ago, I told two people who loved one another it wasn't my time yet to marry them. Because I cared more about my job and my credentials than I did their dignity. I felt like a rat afterwards. I felt, deeply, that I had not only harmed their dignity, but that I had betrayed my duty as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The two said they understood, but they left in tears. It embarrasses me to even remember it.

There were tears of a different sort this past Friday in our living room. Shed for a different, nobler reason.

It is always the right time to guard and protect the dignity of another. The Bible doesn't say, but I bet you anything that's what Mary told Jesus at another wedding long ago.