

“The Troubling Reality of Divine Reluctance”

John 2:1–11

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It is a familiar story with many well-known themes. Jesus changes water into wine, it is his first miracle or sign, and it disturbs many pious people while delighting others. A staunch teetotaler in my mentor’s church was asked if she believed that Jesus changed water into wine. After a long pause, she finally replied, “Well, yes, I suppose that I do, but it has been an embarrassment to me all my life.”

The story never fails to evoke some sort of response, and not all of this is related to the specifics of what Jesus does. The story begins with the notice that something goes wrong with a wedding, in this case, the wine runs out, but the truth is this immediately grabs our attention because something almost always goes wrong with a wedding. As someone has put it, weddings are accidents waiting to happen. They are sacred events, and occasions for joy and meaning, but with all the anxiety involved, all the fanfare, and the desire for perfection, something is bound to go wrong, or at least not according to plan.

I know of a wedding where the groom came out with a bowling ball chained to his belt. The father of the bride was performing the wedding. If it had been me, there would have been no wedding that day! At Ian and Brittany’s wedding, which I did perform, I told them they could kiss before I pronounced the benediction for which they had chosen “Roads Go Ever Ever On” from *The Hobbit*. I blamed this misstep on a helicopter that flew over from a nearby hospital in Memphis. But I noted my error and pronounced the benediction whereupon Ian asked, “Do we kiss again?” The answer was, “Yes!”

Something is bound to go wrong at any wedding. This time, the wine runs out, and Jesus eventually solves this problem, but this story is about more than a wedding and the need for wine. The wedding feast is symbolic of God’s great plan for humankind, and the wine points to an abundance of joy that is sure to come in Jesus. We know all of this.

What we may not notice, or at least not dwell on, is the awkward part of this story that highlights something troubling. It begins when the mother of Jesus — she is not named here, she's just his mother — tells him the wine has run out, and he replies, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." *Woman?* This is how he refers to his mother? It is the term of endearment I use for Dana — *woman* — spoken with affection. I'm not sure how she hears it...

Rationalizations have been given for why Jesus is not being abrupt or downright rude here, but even if he isn't, what he says is still coldly minimal. They've run out of wine. So what? What does this have to do with us? He clearly thinks she wants him to intervene because he says, "My time has not yet come." I'm not ready to start this big journey of transformation. In the end, he changes his mind and makes the wine, we don't know why, perhaps because like everyone else, he knows he better do what Momma says. But we're stuck with the reality of Jesus' hesitation to intervene, his reluctance to help.

Religious education professor Carol Lakey Hess calls this the scandal of divine reluctance, as she asks, "Why does God the incarnate one hold out?" She notes some possible explanations. Some people may have had too much to drink already. Jesus shouldn't be a cash and goods dispenser. Or, as Jesus says, it is not yet time for him to begin his ministry. God is in control here, and it simply is not time. Yet Jesus' mother sees a need he could and should meet, as many of his followers do to this day. Hess continues, saying:

We see a world in need and believe in one who claimed to bring abundant life to those in need. In a world where for so many there is no clean water — let alone fine wine — where is the extravagance of God? In a world where children play in bomb craters the size of thirty-gallon wine jugs, why the divine reluctance? In a world where desperate mothers must say to their small children, 'We have no food,' why has the hour not yet come? No matter how we rationalize divine activity, we still want to tug at Jesus' sleeve and say: 'They have no wine.' (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, p. 262)

What all of this points to is what theologians call theodicy, the attempt to justify belief in the goodness of God while recognizing the presence of evil, suffering, and injustice. It is a heavy concept not restricted to academia. It is perhaps the central challenge to belief in an all-powerful and all-loving God. How can the Holocaust happen when a good God is in control? Or how can — you fill in the blank — happen when a God of compassion who wants to help exists?

Biblical scholar Bart Ehrman says that his wife contends that it is this issue that has pushed him to agnosticism. Bart grew up in a fundamentalist context but later rejected the trappings of that ideology and became a progressive scholar/believer. Over time, he came to doubt even more intensely some of the premises of faith. Many, especially in fundamentalist settings, assume that he lost his faith because of liberalism. The real issue is theodicy, and his wife insists the problem is that he still thinks like a fundamentalist, he wants a black and white solution to the problem of evil, and there simply isn't one.

Whether she is right about Bart or not, she is right about theodicy; there isn't a black and white solution. There are possible explanations for the presence of evil. Perhaps it is not time for God to resolve things yet. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, quoting nineteenth-century abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Or perhaps we are the problem. God seeks to overcome evil with good but chooses to do so solely through human agencies, and we haven't allowed God to use us. Or, to take a cue from our story from John, perhaps someone needs to prod God into action, as Mary prods Jesus. We may like one of these explanations, but none is black and white, none is without faults.

So, where does this leave us? While there may be no simple answer, there are some ways of proceeding that might be helpful, beginning with a conviction not to place blame for evil and injustice on God. Many people hold a rigid view of providence wherein God is viewed to cause every aspect of our existence. They claim to take comfort in the knowledge that God is in control, no matter what happens, we just don't understand the long view of what God is doing.

The Holocaust alone renders this simplistic view invalid. There is no way to justify the extermination of seven million lives! But on an individual level, I have worked with many people who wanted to hold on to this view but simply could not at some point, like the man who lost not one but two children to separate traumatic accidents. In Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, when a white mountain girl named Amy Denver sees the back of an escaped slave named Sethe ripped apart from having been whipped, she says, "Come here, Jesus... What God have in mind, I wonder (p. 79)." God has nothing to do with the evils of slavery or the tragic death of children or the horrors of the holocaust.

Perhaps this humorous old saying says it best.

There were the Scots who kept the Sabbath
and everything else they could get their hands on.

Then there were the Welsh who prayed on their knees
and on their neighbors.

Thirdly there were the Irish who did not know what they wanted
but were always ready to fight for it.

Lastly there were the English who considered themselves
a self-made nation, thus relieving the Almighty of a dreadful
responsibility.

There are many dreadful responsibilities of which the Almighty needs to
be relieved. God does not cause evil, injustice, and suffering.

Once we establish this, we can lean into the reality that God does
work through human agencies. This is not to say God can only work
through us, but God does work through us. How often do we ask God in
prayer to do something God already has given us the ability to do? It is
not an either/or proposition. We can pray *and* act on our prayer.

We can pray for people who lack adequate clothing *and* provide
clothing for them, which we do through our clothing ministry. We can

pray for the hungry *and* help feed them, which we do through *And Also with 'Cue*. We can pray for the homeless *and* provide shelter for them on cold nights, which we do through the White Flag Shelter ministry. We can pray for an end to racial injustice and work to end it which we have this weekend.

We pray every week, if not every day, for God's realm to come, God's will to done, on earth as it is in heaven. There is little integrity to our prayers unless we put feet on them. Since there is evil and injustice in this world, we are called to do what we can to challenge them. We are a part of how the goodness of God prevails.

But for this to happen, we have to hold on to the hope that goodness and God will prevail. This may be the most important thing we can do, and the most difficult. To keep laboring for good when it seems destined to fail requires a kind of faith that resembles downright foolishness, but this is the nature of faith – it is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen, according to Hebrews 11:1.

It is what motivated those who have genuinely worked for an end to the war in Israel and Gaza, which seemed impossible, but now may be happening. It is what the Ukrainian people are motivated by in the battle against Russian oppression. It is what motivated President Carter to end the devastation spread by a parasite named Dracunculiasis or Guinea worm, something that has very nearly been accomplished. Faith may not guarantee immediate results, but hopelessness does guarantee failure. There is good in the world. God is at work. There is reason to put our shoulder to the plow and keep seeking something better.

We may never find a complete answer for what appears to be divine reluctance. We are better off leaving some questions unanswered if the only answers we have point to an image of the Divine beneath the character of the God we know in Christ. And for the record, it is OK to ask questions like this. There is a place for what someone has called “quarrelsome protest” in healthy faith. But in the end, it's a matter of trusting in God and working for good, overcoming our reluctance. Our story ends with an abundance of wine. Our calling is to see that everyone is included in the celebration!