

Saving the Best for Last

*a sermon preached on January 23, 2022 by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno
based on John 2:1-11*

A young student at Oxford University was taking an important examination in religious studies. The examination question for this day was to write about the spiritual meaning at the bottom of the miracle of Christ turning water into wine.

For two hours the student sat in the small classroom while other students filled their pages with complex theological explanations. The exam time was almost over and this one student had not written a single word. The proctor came over to him and insisted that he commit something to paper before turning it in. The young Lord Byron simply picked up his pen and wrote the following line: "The water met its Master, and blushed.

Now, I did my best to check that account, and though I found many citings of it, I found no verification, so I will chalk it up as apocryphal. It is, however, beautiful.

And part of the effect of its beauty depends on whether the listener understands *Jesus* to be beautiful.

The bit of *eros* in Byron's comment, that the water blushed, is what the gospel story generally lacks – except in one instance where an unnamed woman washes his feet with her hair and rubs his feet with something called nard.

What are we to make of Jesus's relationships with women? Well, don't go looking into the movie or novel *The Da Vinci Code* expecting to learn anything about Jesus and Mary Magdalen. That's totally bogus.

If you want to know something about a man's relationship with women you can do worse than to start by examining his relationship with his own mother, and, in the case of Jesus, this gets at something many interpreters of this morning's text have been baffled by for several decades now.

Not the part where Mary leans on Jesus to do the miracle. No, look instead at the part of the story where Jesus refers to his mother as "woman," -- as in, "Woman, my time has not come yet." This is very odd to sociologists of first century Palestine. There is no parallel for this kind of indignation with a mother in any piece of ancient Greek or Hebrew literature. How shall we account for it?

Well, in the first century, childhood and young manhood were something to survive; something to get through so you could be a full-fledged adult. The older you lived, the more respect you were due.

So, one explanation might be that Jesus is still fighting for his own agency while his mother is struggling with her precocious son for her due as a mother.

The sparks fly as they do in many relations between grown sons and mothers.

Our culture is almost the opposite. It is children who are prized, and youth is idealized. Age, or at least what age brings us, is to be avoided at all costs.

To compare this value system to the miracle at Cana, our culture says the first half of the party (birth to age 35) is what life is all about. The second half is to try to slow or stop the process of losing those things that make the first half of the party the most valued part.

Jesus turns so many things on their heads – could we possibly imagine him turning our own cultural values upside down in his miracle? Would I be going too far to turn the whole thing into an allegory?

Here's what I am talking about -- Can the best wine of life be said to be available to us in the second half of life?

I don't want to be glib about this. I have an elderly friend who once said to me, "Whoever wrote, 'Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be,' couldn't have been old." I don't want to oversell age and undersell youth. But then we should be careful about doing the opposite, too. Listen to this from an anonymous senior-aged gentleman who was part of a study done on Adult Development.

"Contrary to all expectations, I seem to grow happier as I grow older. I think America has been sold down-the-river on the theory that youth is marvelous, but old age is a terror. On the contrary, it's taken me sixty years to learn how to live reasonably well, to do my work and cope with my inadequacies. For me youth was a woeful time – sick parents, war, relative poverty, the miseries of learning a profession, a mistake of a marriage, self-doubts, booze and blundering around. Old age is knowing what I am doing, the respect of others, a relatively sane financial base, a loving wife, and the realization that what I can't beat, I can endure." Can you relate?

Let me take this a step further ... George Santayana once said, "Never have I enjoyed youth so thoroughly as I have in my old age. Nothing is inherently and invincibly young, except spirit. And spirit can enter a human being perhaps better in the quiet of old age and dwell there more undisturbed than in the turmoil of adventure."

I think that's very true. I've seen this many times.

You may remember years ago when our Portland Art Museum featured a traveling exhibit of the works of "Grandma Moses" (Anna Mary Robertson), the wonderful American folk-painter. She lived from 1860 to 1961. Interestingly, she didn't begin painting until her 70s when she had to give up embroidery because of arthritis.

I love how she was discovered. A big city art dealer spotted a few of her paintings hanging in a drugstore near her home in rural Hossick Falls, New York. He bought them all and asked the pharmacist, "Do you know if she has more?" The man said, "I'm sure she does." "Then tell her I'll be passing through here tomorrow," he said, "I'd like to buy ten more pieces."

The pharmacist called her. She only had nine paintings, so . . . (I love this) she took her widest landscape and snipped it in two, up the middle, so she'd have ten.

They put them both side-by-side at the Portland exhibit.

By her 80s she was a great success. And this is the most important part of the story, one day she noticed the chrome hub-cap of a car parked in the driveway of her farm. You know how old cars had tons of chrome. Anyway, she saw her whole farm captured in a rounded reflection there. At that moment her best work began. She'd caught a new perspective, a fresh vision. That's because she had a young spirit, as I was saying.

There's a lot of talk about burn-out these days. But you know, people don't burn out from working too hard, or too many hours. They burn out from having work to do that is meaningless. They burn out when they continue doing old things in old ways, over and over.

It appears that people can, indeed, go on and on as long as they take a fresh look at life; as long as what they take up to do is meaningful for them, and has a freshness.

You know, you don't have to be Grandma Moses to respond to that spirit. Consider this story – it's told in the first-person by a woman who looked hard at age 60 and it was scaring her. She only gives her initials in this account -- B.C.

Last spring, I made a major life change, and I wasn't suffering from a mid-life crisis. At 57 I'm way beyond that. I decided I could not wait eight more years to retire, and I could not be a legal secretary for eight more years. I quit my job, sold my house, furnishings, car, gave my cat to my neighbor, and moved to Prescott, Arizona, a community of thirty-thousand, nestled in the Bradshaw mountains with a fine library, community college, and a beautiful town square. I invested the proceeds from the sale of everything and I now receive \$315 a month in interest income. That is what I live off of. I am anonymous. I am not on any government programs. I do not receive any kind of welfare, not even food stamps. I do not eat at the Salvation Army. I do not take handouts. I am not dependent on anyone. My base is downtown Prescott, where everything I need is within a radius of a mile and a half – easy walking. I have a post office box – cost: \$40 a year. The library is connected to the Internet, and I have an e-mail

address. My storage space costs \$37 a month and I have access to it 24 hours a day. I store my clothes, cosmetics, hygiene supplies, a few kitchen items, and paperwork there. I rent a secluded corner of a backyard a block from my storage area for \$50 a month. This is my bedroom, complete with arctic tent, sleeping bag, mattress, and lantern. I wear a sturdy pack with a water bottle, flashlight, toiletries and rain gear. Yavapai College has an Olympic-size pool and a woman's locker room. I take college classes and have access to these facilities; cost -- \$35 a month. I go there every morning to perform my toilet and shower. I go to the Laundromat with a small load of clothes whenever I need to; cost -- \$26 a month. Looking presentable is the most important aspect of my new lifestyle. When I go to the library, no one can guess that I'm homeless.

The library is my living room. I sit in a comfortable chair and read. I listen to beautiful music through a music system there. I communicate with my daughter via e-mail and type letters on one of the computers. I stay dry when it is wet outside. Unfortunately, the library does not have a television, but I've found a student lounge at the college that does. Most of the time I can watch The PBS Newshour and other Public TV programing I enjoy.

Eating inexpensively and nutritiously is my biggest challenge. My budget allows me to spend \$200 a month for food. I have a Coleman burner and an old fashioned percolator. I go to my storage space every morning and make coffee, pour it into my thermos, load my backpack, go to the park and find a sunny spot to enjoy my coffee and listen to NPR's Morning Edition . . . Back to eating. The Jack In The Box has four items that cost \$1 -- There's a nutrition program at the adult center where I can eat a hearty lunch for \$4. For dinner, back to the Jack In the Box. I buy fresh fruit and veggies at Safeway. . . In the evening I make popcorn on my Coleman burner. I only drink water and coffee; other beverages are too expensive.

I've let my hair grow long, and I tie it back in a ponytail like I did in grade school. I do not shave my legs. The natural look costs nothing. I love going to college. This fall, I'm taking ceramics, chorale, and cultural anthropology for enrichment, not for credit. I love reading all the books I want to but never had enough time for. I also have time to do absolutely nothing.

Of course, there are negatives. I miss my friends from back home. Claudette, who works at the library, befriended me. She never pressures me to live differently, and I know she's there for me if I need her. I also miss my cat. I keep hoping a cat will come my way, particularly before winter sets in. It would be nice to sleep and snuggle with a furry body. I hope I can survive the winter. I don't know what I'll do if I get sick. I'm generally an optimist, but I do worry. Pray for me.

Well, that's one way to make your peace with the workaday world and the choices one made growing up, but someone I shared this with pointed out to me, that she could use some of her time to, maybe, help other people. It would take

her out of herself in a healthy way. Like most radical change, her idea solved some concerns but left open the door to others.

But let me ask, how much power do the rest of us really have over making our twilight years happy? What might indicate whether the wine in the second half of this journey might be better than the vintage in the first half?

The best book I've read on this question is called, *The End of Old Age*, by Marc Agronin, M.D.. The gist of his book can be summed up in three statements ...

- 1) Why age? To find wisdom.
- 2) Why entertain the idea your life might have meaning? To realize your own specific purpose.
- 3) Why choose to do more than just relax and travel in retirement? In order to do your part to make the world a better place than you found it.

He mentions the French painter, Henri Matisse who found himself bed-bound at the age of 72. He couldn't paint any longer, but instead of feeling sorry for himself, he looked for new ways to be creative. So he began cutting colored paper and turned his cut-outs into some of the most iconic art of the 20th century. Not just passable art. Wonderful art.

When fellow artists heard that he was turning out paper cut-outs they thought, "Poor Matisse. He can't paint any longer so he's returned to his childhood."

It took a lot of courage to do what Matisse did and in time the critics decided he was turning out the finest art of his life.

Matisse felt he had been given a second life. And here is what he said about it: "Even if I could have done, when I was young, what I am doing now, I wouldn't have dared."

The key thing about Matisse is that age brought him courage he did not possess as a young man. It freed his creative spirit. It gave him the *chutzpa* he needed to take risks he wouldn't have dared take years before.

Speaking of aging as a gift, Matisse said, "I have needed all that time to reach the stage where I can say what I really want to say."

As Jesus launches into his adult life right here at the wedding he's, as I said, contending with his mother. But he is also beginning the second chapter of living – the second half of life and this half is what it's all about -- connecting with more and more people to celebrate the joy of having breath in your lungs and the gift of another day; yes, and also finding the courage that often comes in our later years to take on the powers that be, and in that, to become what he was meant to be.

Speaking for myself, I could have retired a few years ago but I keep doing this work because I feel in some ways that it still fits me like a glove. Here's the thing. I'm kind of a geek. I don't watch much television – or do the things most people look forward to doing in retirement. The things I watch or read “for fun” are in fact the kinds of things that end up in essays and poems and sermons like this one, and if I was retired I would still read and study the same things – so, I see no advantage in pulling the plug.

One more example to close this out ...

One of the dearest people in the church I served for 14 years down in Ashland was a man named Dan Bulkley. Dan was born in Thailand, where his father was a medical missionary and his mother, a teacher. Dan went to school in India. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees at Pomona College in Southern California. But his college time was interrupted by World War II where he worked in intelligence in the pre-war equivalent of the CIA.

He felt he had missed the boat growing up. Being overseas so much of his youth and early manhood, having to go to war, he didn't get to compete properly in athletics, and he knew he was good. Especially at track and field.

Well, having missed his chance, he decided to coach as a vocation. He began coaching high school sports and ended up coaching at Southern Oregon University. And here is the reason I'm mentioning him. His life was lived upside down, because it was in retirement that he began to compete in serious athletic events.

Dan ended up being the best Track & Field athlete in the country over 60. And then he did it again in a new division when he hit his 70s. And then he did it again in his 80s. And then he did it again in his 90s And, on his 100th birthday ... he ran a 100 yard dash, alone, because there was no one left alive in the country over 100 who could even run.

Dan got such joy from it all. He was about the humblest man I'd ever known. He didn't do it for the medals or to have people look at him. In fact, he shied away from any notice. He did what he did just for the joy of being alive and the opportunity to do his best.

Dan died a couple of years ago at age 101 but I was so glad to have gotten to visit him at 99 when he was still thriving and looking forward to that last competitive sprint.

Amen