

The Miracle of Generosity
John 2:1-11
NUCC Traditional (Stewardship Sunday)
20 January 2019

*PRAY

I was having a difficult semester in college. Or at least that's what I said. I believe it was the fall of my sophomore year. And unlike any of you, or your children or grandchildren, I was having one of those semesters where my fraternity life and social life was really getting in the way of college. I knew my grades would be lower than usual, and, sure enough, when grades arrived over the holiday break, it was as I expected.

I took the grade report to my parents and explained that it was bad. I was honest about what my priorities had been and how that would change. They weren't thrilled, but they were grace-filled. My dad looked at me and said: "Dawson, we look at paying for your education as an investment. When we have a financial investment not performing as expected we withdraw our money and put it into a different investment. Do you have any questions?"

On Thursday, our nation lost a great poet. Mary Oliver was born on September 10, 1935 in Maple Heights, Ohio. Ms. Oliver was an American poet who won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. In 2007 The New York Times described her as "far and away, this country's best-selling poet."

The Summer Day
By Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

So, as we gather on this rainy Sunday morning, still in the first month of a new year, I wonder for myself, I wonder for you, and I dream about this church surrounded by Mary Oliver's haunting question: **“[W]hat is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”**

The story of the wedding at Cana is one of the most famous stories in the Bible. It has been the basis of many sermons and numerous misinterpretations. In fact, there are so many good misinterpretations of the text that I am not sure which misinterpretation I like the best.

I recall hearing a sermon based on this text. The preacher said, “In Cana, everybody was having a good time at the wedding banquet. There was a lot of music and dancing. It was a hot day. People got thirsty. They ran out of wine. Everybody

began to get sad. But Jesus didn't want that to happen. Rather, he wanted a celebration. So, voila! Jesus turned water into wine, and the party continued."

"After all," claimed the preacher, "Jesus loves a good party."

Now that's something most of us want to believe. It is good to think the Lord intends to bless our human celebrations. We hope for the coming day where there will be a wedding feast of the Lamb that never draws to a close. But as pleasant as that hope can be, it has nothing to do with this text. There's no hint at Cana that Jesus is a party animal. If anything, he comes across as a stern figure who was annoyed to be called away from his table.

Another interpretation of the story came from a Bible study group. The group was talking about the wedding at Cana story, and someone said, "I think it's a wonderful tale. Jesus overcame his initial hesitation to do the right thing. Think of it: The bride and groom must have been terribly embarrassed. The party had gotten out of hand. They didn't have enough appetizers. The roast beef wasn't sliced thinly enough. Worst of all, the caterers ran out of Zinfandel and Chablis. It must have been awful. But Jesus was there. He produced some wine, and everybody escaped what would have been a catering disaster!"

That, too, is an interesting view of the wedding at Cana. The Jesus portrayed in this text is not the least bit concerned about saving people from social miscues. He seems totally unconcerned about etiquette. Jesus took six stone jars normally used for Jewish purification rituals and made them carafes of his new wine. Is Jesus concerned about social proprieties? I don't think so.

One Saturday in New England, a priest gave one more spin to the story. It happened at a wedding, of all places. The priest looked at the bride and groom and said, “You’re about to begin a new life together. Sometimes this new life will fill you with joy and happiness. Other times, however, it may feel like you’ve run out of wine. When those dry occasions inevitably arrive, remember the wedding at Cana. Just turn to Jesus and ask him to fill you up with wine. He will always come to your assistance whenever you ask.”

Of all the misinterpretations of Scripture I have ever heard, that misinterpretation is the most comforting. Unfortunately, it can’t be authorized by this text either. Jesus is at the party. The party runs out of wine. Nobody from the wedding party bothers to tell Jesus. It’s just as well. When his mother brings up the matter, he essentially brushes her off.

She informs him, “They have no wine.”

Jesus replies, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me?”

And as she looks at him with maternal pressure. Jesus stares through her and says, “It’s not my hour. It’s not my time.”

It is difficult to handle this story without it slipping out of our hands. It defies reduction. Is this a story about a wedding? I don’t think so. **This is a story about the miracle of generosity.** This is a story about generous wedding hosts who want to ensure that, yes, they follow social protocol of the day, but it’s more than that. Likely these were not wealthy people hosting the reception, but they still wanted their guests to be filled with good food and good wine.

And this story is about the generosity of Jesus, the Christ, who could not say “No” to someone who had need. Despite his desire to remain under the radar, Jesus took the opportunity to model generosity for everyone that day.

And that is what I see in you, time and time again. **You not only understand the miracle of generosity; Naples United Church of Christ lives it.**

This past fall, from Thanksgiving through Christmas, you gave \$46,541 to designated mission projects such as: The Christmas Fund of the Pension Boards, The Shelter for Abused Women and Children, Harry Chapin Food Bank, Angel Tree and our newest project to provide solar powered lights to underdeveloped countries so that children can see to do homework and parents can see to cook. Also, \$516,851.40 passed through our Board of Mission and Outreach designated giving line, and went mostly to this community, but also to Guatemala and Haiti to support projects making a tangible difference around the world.

And while all of that was going on, we expanded our pipe organ with the new Young Festival Trumpet and hosted the Florida Conference Annual Meeting. Our income also exceeded our expenses by just over \$60,000 producing a surplus that can help pay to replace aging air conditioning units on our campus; the one replaced last week dated back to the 1990's.

And while air conditioning stories are not as exciting as mission and outreach, they both require the same of each of us: **We must be the miracle of generosity.** As my father wisely said to me so many years ago: “If an investment stops performing, I move my money.”

People of God, this church is making a real difference in real lives, from Guatemala to Grace Place, from St. Matthew's House to Baby Basics. Our church makes a difference, and becomes who God is asking us to be, because of your generosity. Your investment in this church is performing well. And I am excited to see how you will respond in your generous way to our stewardship material that you will receive this week in a mailing.

God is dreaming big dreams for our church and needs each of us to be the miracle of generosity in our "one, wild precious life." May it be so.