

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



“Learning How to Tell Time”

A sermon by Thomas G. Long

October 11, 2009

Isaiah 62:1–5; Psalm 36:5–10; John 2:1–11

It’s a wonderful thrill always to be with this remarkable congregation at worship. And I appreciate your opening the pulpit and your hospitality to me again.

People who have a lot of experience with weddings, I’m thinking about ministers, florists, caterers, wedding planners, mothers and fathers of brides and grooms, people who know something about the intricacies and complexities of a wedding ceremony, these people share a piece of secret knowledge. Namely, whenever there is a wedding, something is going to go wrong. You can count on it. It might be large, it might be small, it might be hidden from view, it might be out there for everybody to see, but there are simply too many details between the ordering of the invitations and the throwing of the rice for there not to be at least one little glitch in the service. We could probably have fun this morning, going around the room, telling wedding stories. Stories of fainting brides and grooms, splitting tuxedo pants, soloists singing “O Promise Me” while the candles quietly catch the greenery on fire. I once went to a wedding in Statesville, NC, where the father of the bride was a rough-hewn, burly construction worker, ill-accustomed to fancy ceremonies and understandably anxious about this one, so much so that he spent several days before the wedding, staring into the shaving mirror and practicing his one-and-only line: “Her mother and I do. Her mother and I do.” When the wedding actually came around and the minister intoned, “Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?” the father startled all of us by announcing, “My mother and I do.”

People who know about weddings share a piece of secret information: whenever there is a wedding, something is going to go wrong. So it should not come as a surprise to us that at this wedding, a wedding where Jesus and his disciples and his mother were on the guest list, something went wrong. What went wrong at this particular wedding was they ran out of wine. Presumably, there were enough melon balls and finger sandwiches, but the claret was exhausted before the receiving line was.

In ancient Jewish society, wine was not just a beverage. It was a sign of joy, a sign of gladness, a sign of the very presence of God, so what they ran out of at Cana was blessing. There was a wedding at Cana, and there was a problem. So what else is new? People who know weddings know the secret.

But careful readers of the Gospel of John also share a piece of secret knowledge. Whenever Jesus is present at an event, nothing is ever as ordinary as it may seem. In fact, Jesus brings the extraordinary to human affairs. The first clue we have that something extraordinary is at work is not in the fact that they ran out of wine. That's ordinary. But in the strange conversation that Jesus has with his mother, she says, "Look! They've run out of wine!" To which Jesus does not say, "Well, mother, what do you expect, it's a wedding, and something is—" In fact, he doesn't call her mother. He doesn't call her Mary. He becomes strangely formal and distant. He calls her, "*Woman.*"

"O, Woman, what is this to you and me," or as some translations put it, "What is this *between* you and me? My hour has not yet come. My time is not yet here." Now there is a phrase designed to make ears of the careful listener to the Gospel of John perk up, because they know how very important the whole theme of time is to John's Gospel, in fact, much different from the other gospels. In the Gospel of John, we actually have two time frames operating simultaneously. There's ordinary clock time. It's a few minutes after eleven o'clock on a Sunday morning in October. Ordinary time. But above it is God's time. Eternal time. And like a sewing machine, eternal time keeps penetrating down into ordinary time, creating signs and wonders of the fullness itself.

Another way to put it is, if you're going to be able to tell time in the Gospel of John, you have to wear two wristwatches: one to tell ordinary time and one to tell God's time.

What time is it? What time is it? What time is it at the wedding at Cana? Well, you look at one watch, and it's an ordinary wedding on an ordinary day in a dusty little Galilean village. You look at the other watch, and "on the third day, there was a wedding at Cana." *On the third day*, there was a wedding. On the third day, he was raised again. Is this a wedding story or an Easter story?

What time is it? You look at one watch, and we have a routine wedding with an ordinary problem going about the punch bowl. You look at the other watch, and this is the wedding feast we have all been waiting for: the marriage feast of the Lamb, where fullness and abundance abound, and the bridegroom himself is present.

What time is it? What time is it? "O, Woman, what is this between you and me? What time is it to you?" In that moment, she becomes more than Mary, more than his mother. She becomes Woman. She becomes Eve at the dawning of the new creation. In that moment, he becomes more than Jesus, more than her son. He becomes her Lord and ours, the Lord of all time and space, if she knows how to tell time. She then turns to the servants, and what she says indicates very well that she knows exactly how to tell time. Pointing at her son and her Lord, she says, "Obey him." And you know what happened: he transformed the water in the jars of purification into more wine than a hundred Canas could drink to the delight of the guests and the astonishment of the caterer, who said, "This is the best wedding I've ever been to; the best wine was saved for last." But his disciples discerned that the Eternal had entered the Ordinary, and his glory was disclosed.

What time is it? The capacity to tell time is essential to the accomplishment of our mission. We simply cannot get up every day and put one foot in front of the other, unless we know that the ordinary trudgings of life, the fragments and breakages of our human community, are infused with the possibility of the glory of God.

The old preacher, George Buttrick, used to love to tell about the church in New York City that had, right over the Communion Table, a stained glass window that they had gotten out of a supply house catalogue. It was a stained glass window depicting the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven like a bride adorned for her husband, and there it was in all of its gaudiness. Streaks of gold, aquamarine rivers of life, emeralds and pearls, angels floating around, and the congregation *hated* it. That wasn't the city they lived in. They didn't have streets of gold. They had streets of crime. They didn't have aquamarine rivers. They had the East River and the Hudson. They didn't have emeralds and pearls. They had tenements and squalor. It was too pious, too otherworld. But then, said Buttrick, over time, the colors in that window began to fade so that ever so slightly, you could see through it, the outline of the skyscrapers and tenements of the city of New York beyond. It was then, said Buttrick, that the window began to take on power, as God's city and their city, God's time and their time merged. One city was the place of mission, the other the image of hope.

What time is it? What time is it? You may remember that wonderful experience in the life of Thomas Merton, a Roman Catholic contemplative monk, when he was walking in downtown Louisville, KY on an ordinary day, and coming to a busy intersection, and suddenly, God's time and ordinary time merged for him. He said this about it:

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I was theirs, that we could not be alien to another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness... We're in the same world as everybody else; the world of the bomb, of race, hatred, the world of technology, mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. Yet, so does everybody belong to God. And if only they could realize this, there's no way of telling people that they're walking around, shining like the sun.”¹

¹ Merton, Thomas. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966.

What time is it? What time is it? At the church where I worship in Atlanta, we have had for years an overnight shelter during the cold winter months for homeless folks. Several years ago, they didn't have enough volunteers, so they asked for volunteers from the congregation, and I volunteered for a night in February. I knew I couldn't do it by myself, so I asked an old friend of mine if he would help me out that night. He's not a member of our congregation; he goes to another church, but he and I have been friends for years. And he's a little bit embarrassed about having a minister as a friend. In fact, he will sometimes begin conversations, "Hey, I'm no theologian, but it seems to me that..." Well, anyway, we arrived for our night in February. It was a bitterly cold night. We put peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and cups of tea on a table, and when all was ready, we opened the door to the cold winter night, and in came several hundred folks, eager to find the warmth of the place and some food and a place to sleep. When everybody had gotten their food, they made nests. We had no cots in those days, just cardboard pallets. They made nests to sleep on. And then I said to my friend when everybody was down, "One of us has to stay up all night. What shift do you want? Do you want the first shift or the second?" And he said, "While these folks are still awake, I'd like to get to know them. I'd like to hear their stories. Let me take the first shift." I said, "Fine. I'm going to the staff room and get some sleep. You wake me up at about two o'clock in the morning." Two o'clock in the morning, he shook me awake. Even though the room was dark, I could feel excitement on his body. "What is it?" I said. "I'm no theologian," he said, "but I think Jesus Christ is out there." I think my friend had learned how to tell time.

Does anybody here have the correct time?