

The Time Is Right

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

April 16, 2023 – The First Sunday of Eastertide

Text: John 2:1-11

Welcome to the second Sunday of the liturgical season known as Eastertide. This is the brief season, only 50 days in length, between Easter and Pentecost which comes at the end of May. Often this is a time when sermons and preachers focus on what are known as the resurrection appearances, the times after the resurrection when Jesus appeared to his followers. There are several different ones, recorded in three of the four Gospels. The purpose of these appearances in all the Gospels is basically the same, to provide proof in varying ways, that Jesus had indeed been resurrected. His admonitions to his followers in all of those were also very similar. He was telling them what he expected them to do while they waited for his return. That his disciples and followers were expecting his return at any moment is clear as is the simple fact that this never happened. Jesus did not return to usher in a new age of God's Kingdom reigning supreme on earth.

When decades had passed without Jesus' return as expected his followers began to realize they needed to engage in some long term strategic planning so that what they knew about Jesus would not die with them. They knew their stories about him needed to be written down or they would be lost forever. This is when the Gospels began to be recorded on paper. While we have names connected to the Gospels, they may or may not have been written by the folks credited with writing them. It's also important to remember that the Gospels are a product of decades of oral storytelling with the first Gospel written account, Mark, finally written

down about 30 years after Jesus' death. This continued with many Gospels – written accounts of Jesus' life and all that he did – finally appearing on paper. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are included in our New Testaments because they were the four Gospels in most common use at time of the Council of Nicea in 325 CE when what is called the canon of Scripture was finalized.

By this time, almost 300 years after the events we celebrate as Easter transpired, Christianity was now the official religion of the Roman Empire. Gone were the early days of persecution and the days of the first house churches were numbered. With every passing year it became increasingly evident that Jesus' followers, and the people who had joined his movement called the Way after his death, needed to figure out a new way of being God's people in the world. This is why I have chosen this Eastertide to focus our reflections on what it means to be church together in the very uncertain, confusing and often times frightening world in which you and I live every day.

The Gospel story we are looking at this morning is John's account of what he identifies as Jesus' first miracle – the turning of water into wine at a wedding in Cana. I confess this has always been a story close to my heart. When I was first considering divinity school years ago, I attended a special on campus event where this was the text for the sermon preached at worship there. The preacher had chosen this text precisely because it is all about time. In Jesus' exchanges with the woman John identifies only as "the mother of Jesus," he makes clear that he is struggling with how he is to begin his work on behalf of God. He has been baptized by John and has begun to gather disciples but that's it. John does not even include the story of his 40 days in the

wilderness which immediately follows his baptism in the other three Gospels. No, for John, Jesus' first action of his ministry happens when he attends a wedding in Cana with his mother and a few of the disciples. And an odd story it is for the start of his work on behalf of God.

We all know this story. Jesus and his mother go to this wedding, presumably of a family friend. It's probably safe to assume that the disciples who came with him knew the family as well. Weddings in Jesus' time were multi day affairs and at some point during the festivities, Jesus' mother realized they were running out of wine – a huge embarrassment to both families if allowed to occur. So she goes to him and simply says, “they have no wine.” Jesus responds to this in typical annoyed adult son fashion saying to his mother, “Woman, what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.” I always imagine he said this to her because he's thinking, “no way is my first miracle going to be connected with making sure there is enough alcohol at a party!”

His mom, knowing her son, says nothing back to him but she goes to the steward – the person in charge of all the food and drink for the wedding – and tells him simply, “do whatever he tells you,” presumably pointing to Jesus. Sure enough a few moments later, Jesus comes over to the servants – in my mind almost shuffling along because it's really annoying to be doing what he just told his mother he wouldn't do – and gives them some rather odd instructions. He tells them to take the empty big stone jars which had held water for the guests to use for washing up and refill them to the very top with water. When this was done, he tells one of the servants to draw out some water for a drink and

take it to the chief steward which he does. And the rest of the story we know – the steward tastes the water now wine and realizes it's the best wine ever. The wedding frivolity is saved and Jesus begins his earthly ministry with this odd miracle.

This miracle story has much richness with it that we could mine for all sorts of insights into Jesus and our own faith. For our purposes this morning as we want to begin our conversations on being church together, what I want us to focus on here is two simple lessons. First is the ordinariness of this story. It is literally plucked from real life, delving into the most mundane of issues – wedding hosts realizing to their horror that their calculations on the wine to be consumed by their guests is way off. How many of us, when we are hosting a party or celebration of some sort for family and friends harbor this as one of our core worries – will we have enough for our guests to drink and eat? The worry of “will there be enough” starts to consume us and, let's be honest, most of us in advance of hosting a special occasion gathering will inevitably make a last minute dash to the store for something to make sure we have enough – enough ice, enough soda or beer or wine, enough dip for the chips, for crying out loud. Anyone who has ever hosted a party where food and drink are featured has had this same fear and therefore can hear this story and think, wow! Jesus saved the day! I wonder what else he might be able to do???

The second lesson of this story is all about time and timing. Think about it. How does Jesus' answer his mother when she tells him of the impending wedding disaster? He says to her, my hour is not yet come. He says, in effect, I'm not ready mom. Now this was a woman who knew her son and, after saying what she needed to say, she goes to the servants to tell them to do whatever Jesus

says to do. She knows, *she knows*, he will do something. I'm guessing she also knew that this son of hers might need a little nudge to claim his inheritance as the Son of God. So she gives it to him, in this mundane little story about a wedding in the family.

I love this story as the beginning point of Jesus' ministry which is so different from the other Gospels. Here Jesus is vulnerable and questioning, wondering what to do now that his baptism has marked the beginning of this incredible turn in his life. No longer the carpenter's son but the Son of God, Jesus has to figure out what that actually means to him. In the other Gospels, he just jumps right into it after he emerges from the wilderness, recruiting disciples with confidence and beginning the work of preaching, teaching, and healing. In John, we see him as ever so slightly hesitant and this woman who gave birth to him knows exactly how to get him off a dime. This is the Jesus I want us to consider this morning as we imagine what God is inviting us to be as this particular little church in this particular place at this particular moment in history.

Dear ones, Jesus is inviting us – you and me, our wonderful little church – to ponder deeply who we are and how God needs us to be involved with each other within our church and with the world outside our doors. And we already know how to do that! You have proven that to each other in the 50+ years this has been the United Congregational Church of Westerly, United Church of Christ. You have had more than your fair share of knocks of all kinds over the years and there is no need to rehash them here. What I want you to reflect on in this moment is one simple truth – we're still here. We're still making a difference in the lives of the people who are members and friends of this church. We are still

making a difference in the community in which we live. In other words, dear ones, we matter! We matter as a congregation, we matter as God's people in this place. We already know that. We are part of the fabric of this community, of Pawcatuck and Westerly.

Think about it. People have always known about us for many reasons, and like the wedding in Cana, on the surface some of those reasons have been mundane, the stuff of ordinary life. We're known for the Christmas Bazaar of course. We're the Bazaar every other church measures itself against. And during Covid, we would not surrender this beloved tradition nor the revenue it generates. So, in your collective genius, you figured out how to do the Bazaar despite Covid restrictions and that transformed the way we've done the Bazaar every year since. Most importantly, we learned we can do traditional things in new ways and be successful in the changes. That's huge!!!

We've also learned we can let some things go. We've had to let go of the beloved Valentine Tea, a true community event. This was a painful decision which God helped us to make again through the intervention of Covid. We couldn't do the Tea for two years because of Covid restrictions and during those two years we learned one very simple lesson – we could not do the Tea and still offer much to the community. We could admit to ourselves that the Tea was more work than we wanted to invest our time and energies in. Make no mistake, we could do it. We chose NOT to do it, because we wanted to invest our energies elsewhere in this our beloved church. Dear ones, this is also huge! Choosing NOT to do something we know others expect and hope for takes courage and wisdom, both of which this church has in spades. As

your pastor, let me assure you that is real gift and blessing since it allows us the time and space to try new things, to consider new possibilities.

And we have!! We have taken the extraordinary step of using some of our available space downstairs to house Operation Fresh Start, a local non-profit helping those trying to start over when life has been completely upended. This too was a seemingly mundane, even small decision, but truly it was not. In order to make that decision to support this initiative, we had to confront the reality that we are no longer a church with a huge population of children and youth. We no longer needed those rooms for non-existent Sunday School classes. There was surely a lot of sadness in coming to that recognition, but we did it. You did it. And as a result, more families are being assisted by Operation Fresh Start than would ever have brought their children to Sunday School here. Those families come to this church and they know who we are and how faith manifests in service. Operation Fresh Start is transforming the lives of those children in ways we could never have accomplished with 30 minutes of Bible stories and crafts on a Sunday morning. That, dear ones, is nothing short of a miracle. And we nurture that miracle every week.

We're also touching the community every week in another mundane, ordinary way – so ordinary that we don't even think about it anymore. That is our pollinator gardens and labyrinth and the reality that our grounds are now like a small neighborhood park. Folks walk here, pushing baby strollers and holding leashes. And when they're here, they're respectful of the property. They are grateful for the lessons the gardens and how we maintain them teach every day about the importance of

landscaping that works with nature instead of trying to control or tame it. Dear ones, this work of preserving and nurturing the pollinators God entrusts to our care is probably one of the most important things we do because it is so vital and so visible. And I am very excited that next Sunday, on Earth Day, we will have a guest speaker here to help us understand this particular ministry even better.

Another of our ministries that makes a real difference in this community which many of us are not even aware of is visible in our rainbow flags. We are an Open and Affirming church of the United Congregational Church and, dear ones, that matters now more than it ever has before. Our brothers and sisters in the LGBTQIA+ community are literally under attack in some quarters of our society, right here in the United States. They are being vilified and victimized by hateful ignorance and willful disregard of Jesus' command to love others as much as we love ourselves. Dear ones, our rainbow flags show we stand against that every minute of every day and let me assure you how much that means to so many in this community. We are known as a place of safety and support for our LGBTQIA+ brothers and sisters. And again, this stance is one which makes us well known and loved in our community. I am happy to tell you that our church has been invited to participate as one of the key stakeholders in the first ever Westerly PRIDE celebration on Saturday, June 3 in Wilcox Park. How amazing is that!

Dear ones, we ARE making a huge difference in so many ways in this community where we find ourselves. And, even more importantly, there is still yet more work to do. What will it be? How will we do it? When will we do it? That we will discover

together as the days and weeks go by. What I can tell you is that, the time is right for us to begin our discernment about what new things God needs us to be doing in our life together as this church. And in this oh so fragile and often frightening world in which we live each day, that is the most important thing we can do as we answer God's call to be church together in this time, in this place.

Dear ones, this time is right for us and for our beloved church! All we need to do is take the next step God places in our path. All we need to do is to trust, have faith and leave the rest in Jesus' hands. That, dear ones, I know we can do because we've already been doing it for 50 years. May God open our minds, our eyes, and our hearts as we wait to see how the next 50 begin to unfold. Amen.