

TMY SERMON – COS
January 20, 2019
Second Sunday after the Epiphany
Isaiah 62: 1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:1 – 11; John 2: 1 -11; Psalm 36: 5-10

My mother is 87 years old and lives in memory care on the north side of the city. And she's a tough old bird. I don't say that disrespectfully or flippantly. She really is a tough old bird.

Mother took her nurse's training in the 1950s. I like to say that back then, they made nurses out of cast iron. And it's true. Mother is still in touch with a number of her fellow students from her nursing school days - she calls them "the chums." And we gather a few of the surviving chums together each year on mother's birthday for a small luncheon party. And when I look around the table at them, I think, "My gosh, they're ALL tough old birds!"

I'm not sure what nursing school is like these days but clearly back in that era, it must have been something like boot camp, and when you came out the other side you were hardened. It had a profound and lifelong effect on my mother. I found out just how profound and lifelong when my husband, John, and I were attending a social event with my mother at the place where she lives. We were working the room and we had just approached a group of people. Thinking I'd make an ice-breaker comment, I said, "This is my mother, Ruth Young. She was a nurse." At which point my mother gave me a disapproving look and said, "AM. I AM a nurse."

For her, it's indelible. We use that word to describe priests as well. But I think it applies to nurses, too - at least nurses like my mother. When you have gone through that intense training, when you've had the ceremony to confer that title, when you have assumed that kind of important and spiritual vocation, it stays with you for life.

I do think that's been true for my mother. Her memory for specific dosages and symptoms and diagnoses may not be what it was. But her knowledge of the nursing arts remains vital and completely current for her. If someone on her floor takes a spill, mother is Johnny-on-the-spot to help them back up. If someone appears with a bruise or a bandage, she is all about knowing how they did it, whether it hurts and how it's been treated and bandaged. Her nursing vocation really does seem to be indelible. Part of her spirit, her soul.

I began to wonder whether the apple had fallen far from the tree in this regard when I started preparing this week's sermon. I should note that I am a lawyer, not a nurse. And I did something this week that I don't usually do: I read some Bible commentaries. And after I did it, I recalled why I don't usually do that!

For the uninitiated, bible commentaries are resources for studying the Bible. Some are many years old and some are more recent. They all just take the Bible book by book, chapter by chapter, and give you a line-by-line breakdown. Translations and alternate translations of key words. Helpful facts about the political and social climate at the time which would have been known to the initial readers and which might affect the interpretation. Cross references to phrases

from the prophets. It's all very helpful, but there are so many of them that, for me at least, after a while it just becomes a babble.

Jesus was being disrespectful when he called his mother "woman". No, that was really a sign of respect to call her that. He turned the water into wine. No, they just pretended it was wine. No, Jesus was the wine. Mary was pushing Jesus to perform that first miracle and start his ministry. No, Jesus was unilaterally deciding to get started.

After a while my head was just spinning. But one point stood out: At that time, in that place, weddings were big deals, often lasting several days. And at that time, in that place, the culture of hospitality was very, very strong. So strong, in fact, that some scholars believe that if a wedding guest did not feel sufficiently well treated by his host, he could sue. My lawyer's brain just lit up at that. Imagine all the women I could represent in law suits for money damages and emotional pain and suffering for all the brides' maid dresses they had to purchase, wear and be photographed in. Based on what all my female friends tell me, I'd never need to look for another client, ever again!

And THAT made me wonder, with a mild twinge of horror, whether I was indelibly a lawyer. Yikes! But more importantly, at least in terms of the topic at hand, this made me chuckle ruefully. It seems like humans are really good at throwing up road blocks and impediments to relationships. Not just in bible times but even today. You need look no further than the relationship between me and my husband, John. For much of our lives and much of our relationship, social and legal structures erected lots of barriers and blockages to try to impede our relationship. And even though we are lucky enough to live in a time in which many of the legal barriers have come down, there are still many parts of the world where those legal barriers remain, and even parts of this country where social barriers are as strong as ever.

This notion of relationships and the impediments we humans can toss at them helped me read and digest today's gospel passage. Until I hit on that point, I was really having trouble with this reading. I mean, this is supposed to be Jesus' big kickoff of his ministry - his first miracle. I was expecting a real show-stopper. Think of Moses, standing in front of Pharaoh, raising his staff and turning the water of the Nile River into blood. Or even, think of Jesus' later work in miracles: healing cripples, raising the dead.

This was nothing like any of those. This seems more like a parlor trick. One that Jesus is being goaded to perform by his pushy stage mother. "Come on, Jesus. Do that thing you do with the water. YOU know which one I mean. With the WATER ..."

And Jesus reacts like a 12-year-old being asked to perform a piano piece at his parents' dinner party. "Oh, mom, puh-lease!"

Not really all that auspicious .

But when I thought of the wedding feast law suits and the way we humans keep finding excuses to try to get in the way of relationships, it hit me. Jesus is fighting that very tendency here. His miracle is clearing out all those human-made barriers so that the main purpose of the event - the

blessing and holding up and cementing of a relationship can take place. And then it made sense to me. That seemed like a very logical way for him to start his ministry. After all, Jesus was all about relationships.

Think about it. Much of Jesus' ministry involved having meals - often with people that society told him he shouldn't be eating with. And that meal-time relationship can be a very special and intimate one. When Jesus sent his disciples out to do ministry, he sent them two-by-two, creating ministry relationships. Jesus tells his followers that when they want to invoke his spirit and call on him to be present at the Eucharist, they need two or three to be gathered together - - a relationship of community. And when someone - probably a lawyer - asks Jesus what is the most important commandment he says it is to love one another. If ever there was a commandment based on relationships that one is it.

That got me thinking about why Jesus might have been so hepped up about relationships. One reason could be related to a song we sing in the atrium. Two children face each other and sing to one another, "I see the love of God in you, the light of Christ comes shining through...". And it's true: we can see the face of God in one another, and when we take the time to get to know a person and form a real relationship with them, that vision, that image of God, becomes even clearer and more personal.

I also think there's something indelible about relationships. I think they leave the same kind of indelible, permanent mark on a person's soul, as the kind of professional mark that nursing left on my tough old bird of a mother. And once again, my mother provides an example. The relationship she had with my father, Marc, to whom she was married for over 50 years, was deep and it nourished her. Even today, although her memory is not always the best and she does not always recall that he died ten years ago, the aspects of that relationship remain vivid for her. It has become part of that indelible web woven out of relationships and her spiritual and pastoral gifts, that has stayed with her, even in memory care.

I don't need to go all the way back to my dad to find evidence of this. Just the other day, mother and I were reviewing Christmas. She asked me what gifts I had received and I told her. I had barely paused for breath at the end of the list when she turned to me and asked, with a cautionary tone in her voice, "Have you written your Christmas thank-you notes?" And wham - immediately 60-year-old Todd was transformed to 9-year-old Todd, and my relationship with my mother travelled across time and space. And before I could even think, like any self-respecting 9-year-old in that situation, I moaned, "Yes, mother, I wrote my Christmas thank-you notes!" A relationship like that, one that transcends time and space can define us over the course of years, even a lifetime. And it can stay with us, indelibly.

I think those relationships, just like those spiritual and pastoral aspects of our professions and vocations, form a complex, indelible web within us.

My mother is a tough old bird. So tough that it sometimes feels to my husband and me as if we need to start thinking about making arrangements for what will happen if we die before she does: who will keep her sweater sets dry-cleaned and replace her chic Italian loafers when they wear

out. But as tough as she is, it's hard to look at her and fail to realize that age does take its toll, on the body as well as the mind, even with a tough old bird.

I believe in an afterlife, but my imagination is too narrow to fully grasp what that might be like. I know mother's physical body won't go there, and neither will her physical brain. So what's left of us to march into that after life? I look at my mother and I wonder if maybe it's that web, that indelible patchwork quilt of relationships and our professional and personal traits, that outfits our souls for the next world. If that's right, then we'd all be well advised to add as many colorful strands to that web as we can.

And of course, therein lies the difficulty. If we are able to enrich our souls through relationships, then it's easy to conclude we should have more of them and make them deeper and richer. But we humans are still as good as we were in bible times at throwing up barriers to relationships, our own as well as others'.

Computer screens, phones. Making ourselves so super-busy and over-scheduled that we don't leave room in the day planner. Time is that one magic ingredient to making relationships, and it's the one thing that is so very hard for me, and maybe for you, to find and segregate and devote

But today's gospel seems to be saying it's worth the effort. And I will say, based on my personal observations, that wonderful web woven of relationships and spiritual vocations can turn a tough old bird into a bird of paradise.