

WAR OF THE ROSES

SHERARD EDINGTON

John 2:1-11

As we all know from personal experience, August in Middle Tennessee can be hot. And the August of 1920 was particularly hot, especially in Nashville where the eyes of the nation were focused like spotlights shining on the stage of the Ryman Auditorium. The reason that the nation was fixated on Tennessee that summer was that the state held the key as to whether or not women in the U.S. would be granted the right to vote.

Seventy years earlier, in 1844, at a women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, women had initiated the suffrage movement seeking to allot one-half of this nation's citizens a voice in its democracy. The process was slow. It took generations of women petitioning, lobbying, and marching, with many being scorned, humiliated, beaten, and even imprisoned for their efforts.

Finally, in 1919, Congress passed an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that gave women the right to vote. The amendment was sent to the states for ratification. At the time, there were 48 states. For the amendment to become law, 36 states needed to approve it. By August of 1920, 35 states had voted approval. Of the remaining 13 states, 12 had either rejected the amendment or surely would. This left the future of the 19th Amendment to one state—the state of Tennessee.

The Tennessee Senate easily voted approval and the prospects in the House looked promising. An initial poll of legislators showed 62 in favor of the amendment and 34 against. In Nashville, that summer, thousands of spectators, lobbyists, and reporters converged on the city. These interest groups began to exert pressure on the lawmakers. The pressure was intense, and votes in favor of the amendment began to fall.

At the time, the right to vote was known as suffrage. Those who favored women's suffrage were known as Suffs and they distinguished themselves by wearing a yellow rose. Those opposed to women's suffrage were known as the Antis and they could be identified by their red rose. This came to be known as the war of the roses—a war that had been waged for over 70 years and whose final battleground would be Tennessee.

The first vote to fall was that of Seth Walker, the Speaker of the House. He changed his yellow rose for a red one. On the floor of the House, he gave a racially charged speech proclaiming, "This is a white man's country!" He warned that if women won the vote then blacks in the South would demand it as well. The truth is, black men had been granted the right to vote with the 15th Amendment 50 years

earlier, but the Jim Crow laws across the South prevented most of them from exercising that right.

Those who opposed suffrage included bootleggers (prohibition was now in effect) and the folks at Jack Daniels set up a suite on the eighth floor of the Hermitage Hotel where they plied legislators with bourbon to induce them to change their vote. The 62 pledges for suffrage fell to 47—below the majority.

On August 18th, 1920, the day set for the vote, a motion was made in the House to table the amendment. The result was a tie, 48 to 48. A second motion to table also ended in a tie. A vote on the amendment was brought to the floor with the understanding that a tie would mean the amendment had failed. The 19th Amendment was about to fizzle out in a tie. A roll call vote was started. The roll of legislators was called and everyone voted as expected. But then they called the name of Harry T. Burn.

Harry Burn was twenty-four years old and the youngest member of the legislature. He was a Republican from Niota in East Tennessee, in McMinn County, halfway between Chattanooga and Knoxville. Twice he had voted to table the amendment. He wore a red rose. However, he had something that no other lawmaker possessed. He had a letter from his mother. His mother, Phoebe Burn (everyone called her Febb), had written her son a nine-page letter filled with updates on the farm and the family.

Febb Burn was a college-educated widow who managed the family farm and read three newspapers a day. She and her son had talked about the importance of women's suffrage before he headed to Nashville for the special session. She, herself, desired the right to vote. She pointed out that the illiterate tenant farmers who worked for her could vote, but she could not. Harry, however, was up for re-election and his constituents were clear, they opposed suffrage.

In the letter to her son, Febb squeezed in a few lines about the upcoming vote that he faced. She wrote, "Hurrah and vote for suffrage and don't keep them in doubt." When the vote came to Harry, instead of saying nay as was expected, he quickly said aye and pulled off his red rose. The vote continued and the amendment passed 49 to 47. The Suffs had won and women voted in that year's presidential election all because of a young man's letter from his mother.

In our scripture reading for today, we find a not dissimilar story about a young man and a request from his mother. This story is found in the Gospel According to John. This gospel begins with its famous prologue, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.* The Gospel then introduces us to John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth and describes how Jesus calls his twelve disciples. That all takes place in chapter 1. Chapter 2 opens with the story about a

wedding. This wedding is held in the village of Cana which is in Galilee not far from the town of Nazareth. The guest list includes Jesus' mother, Jesus, and his disciples.

A wedding in that culture could last for a week—an endless feast of food and drink. At this particular wedding, Jesus' mother informs her son, *They have no wine*. We are not told why they have run out of wine. Did more guests show up than were expected? Did the disciples neglect to RSVP? Were the guests drinking more than the budget anticipated? Was there an issue with the order? We just don't know.

As you can imagine, to run out of wine would be catastrophically embarrassing for the family. It could be the *faux pas* that could define and haunt a marriage for years. Running out of wine was a tragedy in the making.

Jesus' mother is aware of the situation and alerts her son telling him, *They have no wine*. His response is a bit unsettling. He says, *Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?* First of all, Jesus calling his mother *woman* sounds harsher in English than it would in Jesus' language. We would probably say something like “dear woman” or “ma'am.” But his question is valid. What does it have to do with them? It's not their wedding. They're just guests. And Jesus adds, *My hour has not yet come*. We are not sure what this means, but it is clear that he does not feel that he should do anything at this time.

His mother dismisses his hesitation and tells the servants, *Do whatever he tells you*. It is as if she knows that he will do what is right.

But what does she expect him to do? Does she expect him to perform some sort of miracle? This isn't a life-or-death situation; it's just a wedding. Or does she expect him to take his twelve unemployed friends and run down to the store and pick up a couple cases of wine?

At the wedding, there were six large jars holding water for ritual purification. As Jews, before eating, a guest would go to a jar and ladle out a small amount of water onto his or her hands. This was not intended to be a ‘wash your hands with soap and sing happy birthday’ scrubbing; it was a religious ritual. Jesus instructs the servants to re-fill these jars with water. And they do. They draw water out of the well and haul it back to the jars filling them until they can hold no more. Then Jesus instructs them to draw out some water from the jar and take it to the chief steward—the head caterer. The steward tastes the water that is presented to him, but it is no longer just water, it has become wine. The steward has no idea as to the origin of the wine and he calls the groom over to commend him on his choice of such an excellent vintage. The steward tells the groom that, in his experience, people serve the quality wine at the start of the party, and then the cheap stuff when their guests are inebriated and are less finicky. You, he says, saved the good stuff for last.

The story concludes by informing us that this act is *the first of Jesus' signs*. This action *Revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him*. His hour had arrived.

Now, I have no intention of lifting Harry Burn up as a Christ-figure. He is not. He was just a young man from East Tennessee faithfully serving his district. But, there are some intriguing similarities between these two stories. In them, we find two young men reluctant to take an action until urged on by their mothers. In their actions, both herald in a new age. For Harry Burn, it was assuring women the right to vote. For Jesus, it was his first sign of what he was to do. He would change the world. While Harry Burn operated in the great halls of power of the Tennessee capitol, Jesus worked in the back hall of a banquet room, his actions observed only by the servants.

Harry Burn wasn't Jesus, but his action was Christ-like. His decision enabled the disenfranchised to have a voice. On Tuesday, we can celebrate this decision on the 100th anniversary of the Tennessee vote.

As Christians, what we find in this story is what we find throughout the gospels—a vision of a new reality. The wedding reminds us of how we make a new life together with God. Jesus is the new wine. We may call turning water to wine a miracle, but the gospel calls it a *sign*. And that is what it is, a sign pointing to a new way of living, a new way of being with God in God's divine kingdom. In God's kingdom, life is abundant, filled to the brim, running over. In God's kingdom we enjoy the finest vintage of God's love. In God's kingdom Jesus steps out and saves the wedding of a young couple without them even knowing about it. In God's kingdom, all are equal, all have a voice, everyone enjoys a seat at the banquet table, everyone drinks from the cup of God's grace, everyone basks in Jesus' glory, everyone is saved.