

“Signs, Signs, Everywhere There’s Signs”
(9Jan22) John2:1-11; Isaiah62:1-5

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs...”

John tells us it’s a sign, but not a sign of what. He uses the important term 17 times, sometimes around special happenings like this, often in debates about who Jesus is. So, what does this first sign signify about who Jesus is? Let’s consider some of the possibilities.

It could be a sign Jesus does miracles, is a miracle worker. But that’s not really much of a sign, since signs should point to something other than themselves. Besides, if you happen to doubt the factual accuracy of this story, then if that’s all it is, the sign would end up pointing you *away* instead of toward.

Maybe the sign indicates something about God acting behind the scenes. There’s no hand-waving or magic words here, no big POOF of smoke. No one from the wedding even knows Jesus did it. That might show God is invisibly working things out and not needing credit. Although it also says that in this sign somehow Jesus “reveals his glory.”

Don Falkos suggested a metaphor in the sign: instead of waiting for what God would do, the guests fill up on their own wine, and we get distracted with our own things and, seeking elsewhere, miss the revelation of God’s coming goodness.

Maybe it’s generally a sign of God’s abundance, almost ludicrously luxurious and ridiculously rich. After all, these six stone jars were 30 gallons each, so that means Jesus provides something like 900 bottles worth of fine wine. More than anybody probably really needs.

Perhaps that over-the-top nature also occurred to you with Isaiah’s words, that the Lord *rejoices in you and delights in you*, even that “You shall be a crown of royal beauty in the hand of your God.” Could that really be how God values plain little ol’ you?! God’s goodness goes over the top for you.

A specific sign in the story, then, may be Jesus going over the top for the groom. The groom was supposed to make sure there was plenty of wine

and would suffer dishonor when it ran out, and he may have already been of poorer position. So maybe Jesus didn’t take credit exactly because the chief steward, instead of shaming, ends up praising the groom for this abundance of the best wine. Just like you are called a crown and God delighting in you, this may have been for Jesus to restore dignity and honor and relationship.

Perhaps along those lines, Martin Luther King talked about slavery’s social situation, and maybe you can relate in some way to where people “lost faith in themselves. They came to feel that perhaps they were less than human...forced patiently to submit to insult and injustice...But [your] religion reveals that God loves all God’s children”^{*} and “In the final analysis, every person must be respected because God loves them. The worth of an individual does not lie in the measure of their intellect, their racial origin, or their social position. Human worth lies in relatedness to God. An individual has value because he or she has value to God. Whenever this is recognized, “whiteness” and “blackness” [and other ranking distinction] pass away as determinants in a relationship and “child” and “sibling” are substituted.”^{**}

A different sense of going over the top could be a profane sign that God just likes a party, and ensures the alcohol keeps flowing. A description from *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* describes this: “The traditional northern Israelite wedding feast lasted seven days, and, by the time Jesus and his entourage arrive, the party has exhausted its reserves of wine. Jesus then transforms into wine the water in six stone jars used in Judean ritual [washings]...in a feat of miraculous sacrilege by turning consecrated vessels into an open bar.” (p187) An open bar: sounds like a Wisconsin wedding.

I like to point out at weddings that this is the only story we have of Jesus at a wedding, and he’s not acting holy, not presiding at a ceremony with pious pontificating, very explicitly not saying what types of couples shouldn’t be allowed to get married. He’s part of the partying!

^{*} A Testament of Hope, p6

^{**} A Testament of Hope, p122

The previous commentary concludes: “This ‘sign’ is the first of several acts in which Jesus shows flagrant disregard for Judean ritual.” That says Jesus is actually pointing away from religion and sacred setting as he commandeers the consecrated jars for purification.

And right after this is the story of Jesus cleansing the temple. It could be that at Cana, a northern rural town, Jesus assaults domestic religious systems, and then in the southern big city at the temple overturns the prime public one, perhaps signifying connection with God is found not in institutions but in him and in life together.

Further, Jesus is asked what “sign” he’d give for doing that to the temple. He answers, “destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,” and it parenthetically notes he’s talking about his death and resurrection.

And death and resurrection may also be signified at Cana. Again, interesting connections include that here and the cross are the only appearances of Jesus’ mother in the Gospel of John, and the only times wine is mentioned—one with the best wine and the other sour wine on a sponge; one as his first sign, and the other, after a sip, with him declaring “It is finished.” If Jesus first reveals his glory here, he repeatedly says his glory will be complete when his hour has come and he is lifted up on the cross.

As we declare that “on the third day he rose again,” the Cana story also began “on the third day.” So this may be a sign of death and resurrection, about the fulfillment of God’s promises, including Old Testament prophetic visions like: “the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of well-aged wines strained clear. And God will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples; God will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and will take away the disgrace of the people from all the earth” (Isaiah 25:6-8). The first sign Jesus did may point to very big things indeed.

Here’s one final bit from MLK that may bring together these various views, including your hope

and your calling: “The cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go in order to restore broken community. The resurrection is a symbol of God’s triumph over all the forces that seek to block community. The Holy Spirit is the continuing community-creating reality that moves through history. The one who works against community is working against the whole of creation. Therefore...I can only close the gap in broken community by meeting hate with love.”***

*** *A Testament of Hope*, p20

Today's prayers are adapted from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's last Sunday sermon.

Let us pray.

O Christ, we face the sad fact that this hour on Sunday mornings, when we stand to sing "In Christ there is no East or West," we stand in the most segregated hour in America. Bring us to see that the roots of racism are very deep in our country, and there must be something positive and massive to get rid of all the tragedies of racial injustice.
Lord, in your mercy...

Teach us to live together as siblings. Or we will all perish together as fools. You tie us in a single garment of destiny, an inescapable network of mutuality, where whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. This is the way you structured your universe, O God.
Lord, in your mercy...

As we spend millions of dollars a day to store surplus food, let us say to ourselves, "I know where we can store that food free of charge—in the wrinkled stomachs of millions of God's children all over the world who go to bed hungry at night."
Lord, in your mercy...

Spirit of history, do we spend far too much of our national budget establishing military bases around the world rather than bases of genuine concern and understanding? Lord, in your mercy...

This is a time we will really confront a Goliath. God, grant that we will be that David of truth set out against the Goliath of injustice, the Goliath of neglect, the Goliath of refusing to deal with the problems, and go on with the determination to make America the truly great America that it is called to be.
Lord, in your mercy...

With this faith, enable us to carve out of the mountains of despair the stone of hope. With this faith enable us to transform the jangling discords

of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood and sisterhood.
Lord, in your mercy...

May your eternal will, God almighty, be embodied in our echoing demands. However dark it is, however deep the angry feelings are, and however violent explosions are, may we still sing "We shall overcome." Lord, in your mercy...

Your voice, O God, declares, "Behold, I make all things new." God, grant that we will be participants in this newness and this magnificent development and bring about a new day of peace. God, bless us, now and forever. Amen