

Church of the Holy Cross
Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 17, 2016
Mary Hinkle

Isaiah 62: 1-5
1 Cor. 12: 1-11
Ps. 36: 5-10
John 2: 1-11

Signs and Miracles

One of the things that I like best about worshiping in the Episcopal Church is that we have a minimum of dogma that one MUST believe. We're Trinitarian, believing that God is manifest in three Persons; we believe that Christ is risen and will come again; we believe that baptism and Holy Eucharist are the two necessary sacraments; we believe that Christ's death and resurrection offer us eternal salvation. It's all there in the Creed that we recite every Sunday. And our catechism, while it adds more detail, doesn't really impose a lot of required beliefs, either. Didn't know we had a catechism? We do. It's more formally titled "An Outline of the Faith." You can find it toward the back of the Book of Common Prayer, just after the Prayers and ahead of the Historical Documents and the old Lectionary. Interested? Here's a shameless plug: If you'd like to know more about the catechism and other parts of the BCP, come to Adult Forum at 10:00 today.

One of the things that the Catechism addresses, albeit somewhat obliquely, is the subject of our Gospel lesson today: signs. The subject comes up in one of the questions under the heading of "Other Sacramental Rites." The question reads: "Is God's activity limited to these rites?" The answer: "God does not limit [Godself] to these rites; they are patterns of countless ways by which God uses material things to reach out to us."

Uses material things...like water and wine...to reach out to us....to give us a sign. This sounds like the event in today's Gospel, and, in fact, John calls it the first of Jesus' signs and implies strongly that its primary purpose was to reveal his glory so that his disciples would believe in him.

Now, maybe you're accustomed to thinking about this Gospel story as the tale of Jesus' first miracle; it's a word often used to describe this and especially his healings. My Oxford study Bible introduction to the Gospel According to John says that "the first half of the fourth Gospel contains accounts of seven miracles of Jesus." It also points out that John's word for these "wondrous deeds" is "signs." And, indeed, in the NRSV translation of the Bible, none of the Gospels ever uses the word "miracle." It appears only three times in the entire New Testament. In fact, one of those appearances is in today's reading from First Corinthians, which we'll get back to in a bit.

So, does it matter what word we use? Does it make any difference in how we think about the message of this story? I think it does.

First, I find the concept of a "sign" much more straightforward than a "miracle." A "miracle" can get us into some thorny theological territory pretty quickly. Even defining the term can be problematic. C. S. Lewis, in his book *Miracles*, said that his definition of a miracle as "an interference with Nature by supernatural power" was too "crude and popular" to satisfy many theologians, but we use the term even more loosely than that, as least in common speech. We refer to many events as miracles that in reality are coincidental or highly improbable or explicable by specialized knowledge that we don't have. Maybe it's just an event that we've never encountered before. Occurrences that might have seemed miraculous a couple of hundred

years ago can now be explained, given advances in scientific discovery, so who's to say that something considered a miracle—an event with no explanation aside from a supernatural intervention in the created universe—won't be explicable a few years or decades or centuries from now? This opens up some fascinating and meaningful questions, but I fear I lack the formal education in theology or science to say anything helpful. More importantly, as I thought about today's readings, I didn't feel any push from the Holy Spirit indicating that this was the perspective I was meant to address.

So I thought more about the differences between a miracle and a sign, about the implications of using one of those words rather than the other. For me, each term focuses my attention in a different direction. A "miracle" makes me think about the person at the receiving end: the one who is healed or fed; the one who escapes some peril. Why this person and not another? Why this situation and not another? I quickly found myself in the land of "why good things happen to some people while others suffer," and again I felt inadequate to address such questions and unsure that the Holy Spirit was giving me a message to deliver about them.

But when I apply John's word "signs" to this story and to Jesus' other deeds, my focus shifts. If these events are signs, then they have meaning not just for the people involved in them, but for me and for you. It may be nice that a family was spared embarrassment by Jesus turning water to wine more than 2,000 years ago, but it's not very important to me. The act is of great importance, however, if I see it instead as a sign; if I realize that the real point of the transformation of water to wine is to demonstrate God's power and glory. As signs, the things that Jesus does are about defining God, about highlighting characteristics of the Godhead. They tell us things that we need to know, things that will help draw us to God.

So what can we learn about God from the story of the wedding at Cana? We learn that God has infinite power over creation; God is able to alter physical reality, to change the chemical makeup of matter so that one substance becomes another. We learn that God is compassionate toward human beings, even in so simple a matter as a family running out of wine at a party. We learn that God responds to our expressions of need, for ourselves or for others, as we see Jesus respond to his mother's request for help for the family. We learn that God works in God's own time—Jesus (as a human being, I think) says his time has not yet come, but God through Jesus acts anyway.

And if we cheat a little by skimming through the rest of this Gospel to see what other signs John identifies, we find these characteristics reiterated and expanded. God in Jesus heals the sick, feeds the hungry, walks on water, restores sight to the blind, and, in the ultimate expression of power over creation, brings a dead man back to life. God in Jesus pays no attention to status—Jesus heals the son of a royal official but also feeds the poor and lowly. God in Jesus puts compassion above human law, refusing to condemn the woman caught in adultery and saving her from death by stoning. The Psalmist today extols God's "steadfast love," and we see it expressed again and again through Jesus. His acts drew his disciples to him, and as signs of God's infinite love, they draw us to the Lord.

If these events are more than history, more than just incidents distinctive enough to be recorded, it is because they are, as John repeatedly reminds us, signs of the glory of God. As such, they have meaning not just for the people of that time, those people who witnessed Jesus, but for us and for all people.

I said earlier that we'd return to Paul's letter to the Corinthians, and that's where I want to close. In this passage, Paul says that the Holy Spirit has given some people power for "the working of miracles" and has given others different gifts, but "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." I've never met anyone, as far as I know, who can perform miracles—I certainly can't. My gift from the Holy Spirit, I think, is the ability to use words to share with others the meaning I find in the Scriptures. You probably can't do miracles, either, but each of you has some gift of the Holy Spirit that can build up the common good—and in so doing can

glorify God. In our life as Christians, all of us can help draw others to God through our words and actions. We may never do miracles, but we can all be signs. Amen.