

09/14/14 -- Christ in Symbolism: Signs and Symbols
Scripture: Genesis 40:1-8; Matthew 13:10-17

Jesus' words to the disciples always throw me. They are disturbing. *This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.* (Matthew 13:13) For someone who is called to interpret the Scriptures, it is a high act of faith to believe you are one of the ones who *has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.* (Matthew 13:11) We, each of us who has chosen - or been chosen - to follow Christ are called to be readers and interpreters of the symbols and the signs of the faith.

In order to talk about the symbols and signs of Christ, it is important to back this entire discussion up and define things a little bit. When I say *signs and symbols* to you, most of us think of stop signs or perhaps the images on the windows that we have been talking about. And that is true. But symbols and signs are much more complex. The Christian faith has many signs and symbols and I would say there are three primary symbols - the Cross, the waters of baptism and the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper. So to help us understand how symbols and signs work, I will answer four questions today: 1. *What are signs and symbols?* 2. *What do signs and symbols do?* 3. *What do they mean?* and 4. *What do we do with these signs and symbols?*

1. What are signs and symbols?

This past week we bore witness to the 13th anniversary of the attacks of 9/11. The symbol of the event has become the Twin Towers in New York City. Those towers have become a sign and symbol of America's strength, the power of our remembrance of those who died innocently on that day and of our success as a nation. But did you know that before 9/11 the Twin Towers were considered one of the ugliest architectural achievements in the modern world? Almost universally condemned by critics, the buildings were considered a blot on the beautiful shoreline of NYC. They were like big dark uncreative pillars in the middle of Manhattan.

But now, the Twin Towers are symbols. Before they became symbols, they were just buildings, a couple more skyscrapers in a city of skyscrapers. When we try to answer the question *What is a sign and a symbol*, we can see in this particular example that they develop according to an event, or an idea, or a concept. Symbols and signs can come to us in the form of images, language, ideas, people. Symbols and signs, more than anything, are means of communicating meaning. Notice I did not say, "We give meaning to signs and symbols". Signs and symbols are what they are because they communicate meaning in and of themselves. *We* interpret the meaning of those signs and symbols. Symbols and signs communicate meaning, and we interpret that meaning.

This means signs and symbols are bigger than us. We participate in their landscape. Some people go so far as to say that we are intersecting sets of symbols

communicating with one another¹ and the idea of self is itself a symbolic form which communicates meaning to our consciousness. Regardless of how far one goes with this idea, we are interpreters of the symbols which surround us.

Remember Joseph from our reading? The cupbearer and chef tell him their dreams, which are a collage of symbols and signs. Then they say, *There is no one to interpret them.* Joseph says a very strange thing after this. He says, *Do not interpretations belong to God? Please tell them to me.* Joseph knows himself to be a servant of God. If the interpretations belong to God, then Joseph as God's servant is capable of interpreting those signs and symbols of the night. Is this not what Jesus is telling the disciples? *Read the signs and symbols and interpret them because you are disciples of the Son of God.*

So what are signs and symbols? They are communicators of meaning which demand interpretation by those that would recognize and read them.

2. What do symbols and signs do?

All signs and symbols act as a gateway. They always point beyond themselves. This is important for us as Christians in the modern world. It is easy to get caught in the doorway instead of going through the doorway. Personally, this seems to me the greatest difficulty in Christian and religious thought today. The Bible becomes the most important thing, rather than what Scripture points us to. The Cross becomes the solitary focus, rather than the gateway to what is beyond. Even how we talk about God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit can catch us in the net of symbols and signs instead of doing what the signs and the symbols of the faith intend.

The signs and symbols of the Christian faith always do one thing. They point us beyond themselves to the underlying truth of the Gospel, the love and mercy of God. Those symbols of the faith are gateways to truth, knowledge and action in the name of the faith we accept.

The signs and symbols of the faith (remember, symbols and signs act on their own to communicate meaning) demand action based on the underlying truth they point to. The more we know about those signs and symbols, the deeper understanding we have about the truth. And the deeper we know the truth, the more urgent and present the actions of our faith will be.

For instance, the symbol of the Cross demands that we know the truth it points to - that Jesus did something there which involves us. The symbol matters and it points beyond itself to a deeper knowledge of Christ. This knowledge demands an action once we (re)sign² to that deeper truth and understanding. The action we take in response throughout most of the Christian world is baptism, where we personalize and sanctify everyday water into the cleansing waters of life which also covered Our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹ This idea comes from articles by Richard Beck (<http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/>), in a series about mathematician Douglas Hofstadter, author of *Goedel, Escher, Bach*.

² A reframing of the modern understanding of this word by the exceptional book *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* by Crystal L. Downing. IVP Academic. 2012.

Baptism itself becomes a symbol and sign communicating meaning. Our acknowledgment of Jesus' lordship in baptism demands we regularly remember and connect to the tradition of faith stretching back 2014 years by the act of the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper, the simple elements of bread and cup become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. We are speaking symbolically. But we are also participating in a true event. The symbol and the sign become and even create the reality we are stepping into through the doorway of those symbols.

So what do signs and symbols do? They point beyond themselves by the meaning they communicate to us. The Cross points to the love and mercy of God. Baptism points to the forgiveness and cleansing available to us in our life in Christ. The bread and the cup point to the acts of Jesus with the disciples and our continued participation in those acts by following Christ.

3. What do they mean?

I sort of cheated in the last question of what signs and symbols do, because I told you a little what they mean. But that was a little unfair. As a minister, my work is to provide *ways of interpreting* the signs and symbols of the faith. I help you identify the doorway. But we are all called to interpret and communicate the symbols and signs of the faith. My job is *not* to tell you what to think; as a Congregationalist, I consider it my job to provide ways and show you *how* to think about these things.

In answer to *what do the signs and symbols mean?* the answer to that is why we have rites and rituals in the church; why there are different doctrines and creeds and covenants; why there are vast libraries of theologies and groups which study them; why there are thousands of denominations and associations. All of them are trying to answer the question *what does this mean?*

The truth and deeper knowledge is what the symbols and signs are pointing to. In that sense, then, are not all our rites and rituals, creeds and covenants, doctrines and theologies, denominations and associations all also symbols as well, all of them pointing beyond themselves to the deep truths of God and Christ? Paul says it in a mysterious way in Colossians: *For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.* (Colossians 3:3) In a sense, once we have resigned ourselves to the tenets of the faith, we are the mercy of the symbols and their need to communicate their meaning to us. This is because we are not creating the meaning. We are hidden in the deep life of God with Christ and the Holy Spirit. We are participating in the very deep and mysterious life of God with God in the continuing history of the world and the unchanging eternity of God in all of creation.

4. What do we do with these symbols and signs?

Joseph tells us that if we are servants of God, then we are also interpreters of the signs and symbols of the world and of God.

We are called to *interpret the dreams of the faith and the dreams for the faith.* When I say this, it means we need to take our dreams of our future seriously, and I mean there

both our conscious dreaming and our night dreaming. Powerful and deep meaning and ideas are being communicated to us in that realm.

We are also called to *interpret the signs of the times*. This requires discernment and attention. It also requires not buying into the hype which surrounds us with 24 hour media coverage of every bad thing that happens. Jesus says, *And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet.* (Matthew 24:6) The end of the world theologies that the modern world has created are also a net which traps us within the doorway of signs and symbols. For most who are caught in that particular doorway, they miss what the signs are pointing towards, since they always point beyond themselves - they point to peace and promise, hope and acceptance. They point to the Great Banquet and the new heaven and the new earth.

We are especially called to *interpret the symbols of the church*. Each time we come together to worship, take communion and hear the words of Scripture, we are resigning ourselves to the faith. I have used that word - *resign* - several times because you will be surprised by its original meaning. The word first entered the English language in 1366, and it was defined to mean, "*to yield with confidence to a higher authority*". Yielding with confidence to the authority of God - is this not what we do every Sunday morning? In yielding to God, we also yield to the meaning the symbols and signs of the faith are attempting to communicate to us.

You, each one of you, are the sign-readers and the dream-interpreters. The symbols and the signs of the church want to communicate their meaning to you, and they demand action in their meaning. We must learn from them, and learn about them. There is deep and rich history, meaning and possibility within the symbols if we will allow ourselves to resign ourselves to them. What does the Cross speak to you today? What does your baptism say to you from across the years? What does the cup and the bread, the body and the blood of Christ, communicate to you? As Jesus says to the lawyer, *How do you read it? How do you interpret the meaning that has been communicated to you?*

This is not new. Way back when Moses was sending the next generation into the Promised Land, he said to them, *And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. 8You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.* (Deuteronomy 6:6-9) The signs and symbols are all around us. They demand to communicate their meaning. Let us not ignore them.

Jesus says to the disciples, "*To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.*" (Matthew 13:11) You have been given the power to interpret the signs and symbols of this church, and with the power of those signs and symbols you are able to interpret the signs of the times and the culture, and also the dreams of the desire for faith in all those who are in our community. We are all like Joseph in the cell with the cupbearer and the chef. Sometimes the interpretation

of those signs is not comforting at all. It is afflicting, disturbing and very uncomfortable. But sometimes, hopefully more often, the signs and symbols are pointing to the Good News of Jesus Christ. The Good News that God loves you and forgives you and, through his Son, seeks to be in a loving relationship with you so that you might be a symbol and sign of God's love for all who would come into your presence.

Amen.