

For the writer of John's gospel, signs are important. Throughout his writings, he includes seven of them. While in other gospels we hear about *miracles*, in John, we are told Jesus performed these *signs*.

Kristin Whitesides puts it this way: "According to John, the point of Jesus' healings or his feeding of the five thousand, the purpose of walking on the water or raising Lazarus from the dead, isn't to reverse or overcome a natural process. It isn't even in order to inspire awe or wonder. No, for John each of these moments in Jesus' ministry—these signs—point beyond themselves, revealing who Jesus was and what he had come to do. And as verse 11 of our scripture read today says, the first sign in the Gospel of John takes place here. At a wedding reception that has gone on for days, as was the custom. When Jesus turned the water into wine, John says he revealed his glory. And when his disciples saw it, John writes, they believed in him.

So, here's the setting of this story from the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus has not yet begun teaching and working wonders among the people, yet his mother has confidence that he can help when a crisis arises at the wedding of a friend. This short text provides a glimpse of Jesus and his mother as human beings who had friends, who "partied", who fretted when something went wrong.

Kathryn Huey says that "the exchange between Mary and Jesus feels particularly familiar to any parent who has mentioned a need to her child, from a bicycle left in the driveway to a young relative who needs company at a family reunion. Not now, Mom, not *me!* And yet Jesus does indeed respond to the need at hand, with an act of ordinary, earthy compassion for the hosts, who are in a terrible predicament, yet with anything but an ordinary response. However much we appreciate hospitality today, the

people of Jesus' time and culture practiced it as a survival skill, a way of looking after one another in a hostile environment, and an assurance of being looked after in turn.

No wonder it became a matter of honor, as well.”

Huey goes on to say: “The first part of Jesus' response to Mary's observation that the wine has run out sounds almost modern in its detachment: ‘What's it to you and me?’ (Did Jesus shrug or roll his eyes when he said this?) But the second part of his answer sounds much more solemn and theological: ‘My hour has not yet come’. Don't we wonder if Mary wondered what he meant by that? ‘Whatever,’ she may have thought, ‘I have no earthly idea of what you're talking about, but just make sure there's wine for these poor folks, for everyone's sake.’ And then she set about the task at hand, unconcerned, it seems, about what the ‘hour’ was. Mary doesn't appear often in the Gospels, but women (and men) in every age search these stories for hints of her importance to the larger arc of the narrative about God at work in this world. If our God is a God of mercy (which, of course, we believe), Mary is embodying that very gift in this high-pressure situation and handling it all with remarkable sensitivity and tact.”

So, timing, and the plan, no matter how important, take a back seat to human need in this scenario, as it often would throughout Jesus' ministry.

I've preached on this Gospel read several times over the years, as it does appear every 3 years in the lectionary cycle. But something new caught my attention in my reading and reflection this year. We are told that Jesus points out the nearby stone containers—six of them, used to hold water for ceremonial cleansing. These cleansings point out the differentiation made between those designated as “clean people” and those

designated as “unclean people.” The containers are huge—potentially holding 20 or 30 gallons each. But they are empty.

“Fill them with water,” Jesus says. So the servants get to work drawing 120-180 gallons of water and filling the huge containers. Jesus instructs them to draw out a sample to the banquet master. He takes a taste. He’s amazed! “You’ve saved the best wine until last!” he says.

Brian McLaren says that the word *signs* is important. Signs point. They signify. They mean something. Often, the word *signs* is linked with *wonders*. It prompts us to do some wondering of our own, and to try to apply our inspired imaginations to our lives, our world, here and now.

In what ways are our lives—and our religions, and our cultures—like a wedding banquet that is running out of wine? What are we running out of? What are the stone containers of our day—huge, but empty vessels used for religious purposes? And here’s what really grabbed my attention: What might it mean that Jesus has repurposed containers once used to separate the clean from the unclean into a sign of superabundance—of radical hospitality?? While God’s love and grace had once been accessed through purity tests and standards, does it now mean that same love and grace is about to overflow out of those old jars for everyone? So that any who want to drink of God’s goodness have enough to drink their fill?

In the First Corinthian reading, Paul reminds us that “each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” What works of wonder can we ordinary folks accomplish as individuals and as communities of faith that turn despair into hope, hatred into love, and violence into healing?

What unseen power lies within us that we do not recognize or acknowledge?

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. One of his quotes is: *“Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do, and use it for a purpose greater than myself.”*

Dr. King is a hero—an icon—a name that might come to mind when someone asks, “Does God still send us prophets?” He had many gifts, and is remembered for his eloquent words, his courageous deeds, and his deep and abiding commitment to nonviolence as the ultimate form of Christian resistance to injustice, even in the face of violence and intimidation. Justice too long delayed, Dr. King said, is justice denied.

With that in mind, what better way to begin a new year than to renew our commitment to the vision of Jesus, who practiced compassion and justice throughout his life? In our Gospel read we hear about an everyday, earthy but extraordinary deed of Jesus—and his mother—responding to ordinary human need. And what Paul says in his letter to the church at Corinth in our first reading today is true not just for the early church, not just for great prophets, but for us, as well.

I want to believe that Dr. King, while he was a great and gifted man, a prophet even, did things that we can do, too, with the gifts that God has given us. I do believe that there are everyday gifted people who are responding to human need, to work for a better and more beautiful and more just world, to speak for those who have no voice or to make sure the voiceless are heard, to stand with those who are stepped on and pushed out, to walk with those who are making their way to a better day. Works of

wonder, yes, and yet we must realize how *ordinary* and *everyday* these efforts are.

A great diversity of gifts, including the gift of perseverance, continues to be in evidence in this faith community gathered here and online. You continue to use those gifts during this time of transition—this time of looking forward to the future. You are survivors! Certainly, there might be some challenges...there might be some discomfort along the way—but you are blessed with a building with good bones, the presence of youth, and you are blessed with a “get-er-done” attitude.

Whether we are called to offer up our lives for the gospel, or to live that gospel day in or out, year in and year out, in everyday acts of compassion and justice, we are using those abundant gifts, just as God intended, and on God’s own timetable, for the building up of the reign of God.

Thanks be to God!