

## “SYMBOL AND SUBSTANCE”

Symbol over substance. Kissing babies while campaigning is a classic example: “Boy, he must love children. The future of our children is safe with this candidate.” What does it really mean? Not a thing. It just looks good in pictures. Symbol over substance. Is it just me or has our political climate taken a dramatic turn for the worse? It seems to me that it is getting meaner every day. In the health care debate many have made statements like “if this healthcare plan goes through they will start killing your elderly parents.” On an issue as important as healthcare how can we afford to have our elected officials acting so recklessly. There are certainly many reasons to be opposed to legislation as big as this one without resorting to scare tactics. But the ridiculous seems to get more and more traction on both extremes. Symbol over substance.

This same issue is a constant struggle for communities of faith. We have lots of symbols. Look around this beautiful sanctuary. The cross, the table, the baptismal font all are symbols of our faith story. We come to the table every week for bread and juice; symbols of the presence of the Christ. The meaning of symbol is as follows: a symbol points to something beyond itself. There are all sorts of symbols; our flag is a symbol that points beyond the cloth to what this country stands for. Show an American flag to someone in Borneo, and it is not likely to mean anything to them---it is just a piece of cloth with red and white stripes, and white stars. Symbols only become powerful and evocative when human beings endow them with meaning. There is no inherent meaning to our flag. Betsy Ross was rocking in her chair on the upper house porch one day, as legend has it, and she created that first flag. Someone looked at it and said, “I like it.” That first flag had no inherent meaning; it was just a piece of cloth. It took on meaning as we invested it with meaning.

Symbols require imagination and vision. We must have the imagination and vision to see beyond the thing itself to what it represents. This story in the Gospel of John is symbolic. The setting is a wedding in Cana, where Jesus, his mother and some of the disciples are guests of the bride and groom. We know nothing about the couple getting married; we do not know why Jesus and his group are in attendance. All we know is that they ran out of wine, and the party was in danger of petering out. Mary approaches her son and says, “They have no wine.” Jesus responds, “O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come.” But being the dutiful son he asks the stewards to fill up six stone jars, which were used in Jewish purification rites, to the brim with water. They did as they were told, and when the wine steward drew out of the jars, he found instead of water, wine. Not only wine, but fine wine, better than had been previously served. This is the first miracle in John.

In John’s gospel, we see more of the Christ of faith, than the Jesus of history. The wedding at Cana, the transformation of water into wine, is for people of faith, not to prove that he was something special. It is only the disciples who marvel at this act. The bystanders are just that: standing by, not seeing anything unusual. The party just goes on as normal. But for people with imagination and vision, this becomes a miracle. Not symbol over substance. The substance is what gives the symbol power. This symbolic gesture turned water for purification into wine, which is the symbol for the blood of Christ. The blood meant that there was no longer any reason for purification. Ultimately this act is symbolic for the entire gospel. Jesus’ whole life would point to something beyond himself; it would point to the love of God, in human form. This sign, the water becoming wine, is not a miracle to amaze or an offer of proof as to who he was. The sign was a window through which God was revealed.

The rich symbolic language of scripture provides many windows into the reality that is beyond what we normally see. I have always focused on the water into wine, but have never given much thought to the setting. The backdrop is a wedding. It is unlikely that John would have chosen this setting if not for some significance. If we put sentimentality aside for a moment, the love that is affirmed at a wedding is not just a condition of the heart but an act of will. I have officiated at hundreds of weddings over the year. One of the strangest was my cousin Bruce's. I met with Bruce and Jody the day before the wedding, as they lived in Boulder, Colorado. I

read the vows from our book of worship which conclude with: "To love and to cherish and to be faithful to you alone as long as we both shall live." She said, "Wow, that's heavy. Can't we just say something like, "We'll stay together as long as it feels good." You must think I am making this up, but it is the honest to God truth. Their marriage lasted a little more than a year. No surprise. She bugged out and left Bruce with a baby to raise alone.

The significance of the wedding backdrop is many folds. I think it is about will. The love of God is Jesus Christ is not a feeling, it is love in action. The miraculous event at the wedding at Cana would be meaningless if not for the substance behind the symbol. The substance, of course, is that Jesus gives his life in the process. Turning water into wine is not a party trick, but powerful foreshadowing of the determination to follow God wherever he is called. Jesus' life is the prescription for what it means to be faithful. The wedding symbolizes the commitment, the discipline of loving, even when you don't feel like it. It is a life long commitment, and though his life was short, his commitment did not waver.

I love the line from Shakespeare's Macbeth: "*A tale told by and idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing.*" Sometimes our symbols can actually become a stumbling block. When a symbol becomes an end in itself we no longer have a symbol but an idol. What does our flag represent? For many in the world today our country is seen as a war mongerer. To many our country is seen as the culprit in a world wide economic meltdown, due to the incredible greed of already wealthy people. An of course they are correct. We had a lot of sympathy when we were attacked by terrorists on 9/11. When we invaded Iraq on what turned out to be faulty intelligence we lost much of the world's sympathy. What does our flag represent? My dad left Ireland in the late 1940's because he saw no future for himself. He immigrated to the United States coming on the Queen Mary and entering through Ellis Island. Like many he saw the US as a place of freedom and equality where he could create his own destiny. That is what he experienced. He never lost his love of Ireland but if you asked him he would tell you that he was a patriotic American through and through. We can't worship the flag; we need to be critical lovers and honest about

Tomorrow is the national holiday commemorating the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I think there is a lot of resistance to this symbolic holiday because our dominant white culture just does not want to recognize this man or the movement that was so instrumental in changing this country. The holiday is an important symbol that goes far beyond the boundaries of one man's life and death. Some time ago we learned that King was a flawed person and like many other men in power had extramarital affairs. For some people that was a green light to dismiss him. I think he is one of the most important Americans of the last century for what my flag represents. The holiday is not about the person as much as it is about the movement. It is symbolic---it points to something beyond itself. If you still think that black people are inferior I have already lost you and you are probably a lost cause. For me the holiday represents what my Irish father experienced; freedom and equality regardless of race or ethnicity.

Sharlene and I were flying to New Orleans several years ago with a connecting flight through Memphis. The flight to New Orleans was overbooked and we took the opportunity to get a couple of free tickets and then had a long wait in Memphis for the next flight. We took a cab to Beale Street and on the way saw signs for the National Civil Rights Museum. I didn't know anything about it. We went there instead of Beale Street and I am so glad we did. The museum includes the hotel balcony where King was shot and killed in 1968. The museum chronicled movement which began with the Civil War. The bus Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat for a white person was there along with graphic pictures of lynching and other violence imposed solely based on skin color. When we got to the end of the displays I just sat down and cried. It was terribly painful and I was deeply ashamed.

I know many are frustrated by programs like affirmative action, which seek to redress inequities of the past. Whites have been passed over for blacks and other minorities who may not have been as qualified. It is hard to exorcise past wrongs, but it takes our collective will to continue the battle against racism. I participated in a program called The Institutes for the Healing of Racism and learned that people of color deal with racism every single day. I remember a conversation with a former parishioner following the O.J. Simpson trial. "I think he did it," they said. "If I had been on that jury I would have convicted him." That did not seem like a

racist comment to me because I think he did it as well. But what followed shocked me: “Why did she marry him in the first place? She was asking for it, a white girl marrying a black man.”

We have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go. And not just for African-Americans but for all people who are dehumanized. Matthew Fox in *Original Blessing* speaks of a story told to him by a missionary in Brazil “of a bounty hunter in the Amazon who was paid to kill Indians. In a recent interview about his work, he said he once shot an Indian who did not die at once but appeared to be in pain and suffering, ‘just as if he were a human being.’” (p. 268) Let that sink in for a moment.