

PROPER 16, Aug 25, 2019, Year C

- Can you think of a good way to distinguish a *sign* from a *symbol*? This may sound like a purely academic question. But it has a lot to do with how we read and hear the Bible. Given this, *signs and symbols have long had a spiritual meaning*. The best example may be how John's Gospel says that Jesus' miracle at the wedding at Cana was the first of his '*signs*.'
- By contrast, notice how easily we *dismiss* something, by saying "*it's just a symbol*" ~ *as if symbols are only like signs*. Yet, *signs* typically *point* to things that are *elsewhere*, and advertising trades heavily on the use of signs. This is because *signs can be changed or removed without affecting the things toward which they point*. Think, for example, about how Geico continues to experiment with a variety of characters in their commercials, instead of just using the familiar green gecko. *Both the gecko and the other characters serve as signs*, that *point to* an imaginative and creative insurance company. But neither the gecko nor the other characters *embody* the company itself. This allows for how the new characters could replace the gecko *as representatives for* the insurance provider, *without hurting* the company.
- *Imagine this*: someone removes a highway sign pointing to a place called Hopkinsville. If the sign *suddenly disappears*, does anyone think the missing sign means that Hopkinsville has been affected or harmed? *Then consider* another example: *What happens when the American flag at one of our embassies is torn down by protestors?* The difference between an embassy flag, and a highway sign, is obvious. For the American flag is *more than a sign* of American presence; our flag *symbolizes* our presence. And we feel hurt when our flag is hurt! This helps us appreciate the Prayer Book words for when two people exchange rings in marriage. One does *not* say to the other, "I give you this ring as a *sign* of my vow..." Instead, he or she says, "I give you this ring *as a symbol of* my vow..."¹
- Unfortunately, we have *fewer and fewer symbols* in American life, and more and more *signs*. But when everything becomes *merely a sign*, we no longer have *important symbols that participate in the reality they represent*. In the

process, we lose 'markers toward meaning,' and *many* things become empty and seem arbitrary. *Words and actions then only mean what we want them to mean*, and no longer have *intrinsic* and commonly-understood meaning *in themselves*. *As a result, our words and actions lose their connection with other people*, because we begin to doubt the relationship between *our* words and actions, and *theirs*.

- An easy way to notice this, is in how we view numbers. These days, in America, *most people view numbers as having no symbolic meaning* in themselves. Anyone who thinks otherwise must be *superstitious*. But, *in the eyes of our medieval, classical, and biblical ancestors, numbers were often deeply symbolic*. To our predecessors, numbers represented *aspects of reality*. For example, Jesus *didn't just happen to pick twelve* disciples, as if he could have as easily chosen eleven or thirteen. Instead, numbers like twelve represented *facets of God's design for the world*, and the plan of Salvation, not just quantities arbitrarily pleasing to our minds.
- *We need to bring this sensitivity, about the symbolic nature of words and numbers, to how we hear our Gospel today. Why, otherwise, would* Luke have thought it important to tell us that the woman Jesus encounters had been crippled *for eighteen* years?² Luke *could as easily have said* that she had suffered *for decades, or since her childhood*. But *no*, he tells us that it had been *eighteen* years. And consider how *Jesus meets and heals her on the sabbath*. For as we may know, the sabbath falls on the *seventh* day. It represents the seventh day of Creation, and *the fulfillment of God's wise and beautiful pattern for the cosmos*. This helps us recognize the meaningful fact that eighteen involves multiples of *six* - *three* multiples of six, to be precise. This woman has suffered for a period of time that represents *multiples of incompleteness*, a triple amount of *falling short* of wholeness, of *not-yet-experiencing* God's hopes for her and the world. And Jesus brings a completeness for which the whole Creation has been groaning.³

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- Yet, consider the effect upon us of our modern, advertising-shaped, culture. For you might suspect that *the symbolic reading* of this passage that I have just offered, involves *reading something into the text*, something that is *not necessarily there*. Since, as we are widely encouraged to believe, symbols are *merely* signs, that bear no intrinsic connection with what they point to. If so, then *all signs* -whether they are names or numbers– *all* signs are potentially *arbitrary* and *idiosyncratic*. *Here, we must move forward in faith*, and be willing to *entertain another possibility*. The *alternative* possibility is that we will find *more in* this text - 'a *meaning*' that *really is there*, to be *gleaned, savored*, and incorporated in our lives. Its meaning has to do with *blessed rest*, and *when* we rest in a *real* way.
- Let's come at this from another direction. Ask most American Christians these days when '*the sabbath*' is, and a common answer will be '*Sunday*.' If we assume this is true, then our sabbath is *different from the biblical sabbath*, which raises the larger question we have been exploring. *Is the connection between the idea of the sabbath, and a particular day of the week, essentially arbitrary?* As long as we have *some* kind of sabbath, does it really matter *when*? But then, consider what we lose in the process. We lose our connection with biblical faith, with the sabbath that Jesus observed, and with the idea that the sabbath *fulfills* all that has come before. *We take a break on the seventh day, on Saturday*, for a reason ~ a *holy* reason. We do it so we might better appreciate how God fulfills divine purposes through grace and Providence. And so, God's sabbath helps us remember that our future is shaped *as much by God* as it is by *our own* works and efforts.
- This helps us intentionally *live into* the significance of Jesus' resurrection, and how it happened on the *eighth* day, on the *first* day of the *new* week, *rather than on the sabbath*. *The Saturday sabbath represents the fulfillment of God's Creation, and the realization of God's purposes for the world. But then, the first day of the new week, Sunday, represents the Resurrection-transformation of the old Creation into God's New Creation.* In other words, like the disciples and first Christians, *we celebrate the sabbath properly by withdrawing from work*

on Saturday, if we are able! And then on *Sunday*, we celebrate Jesus' Resurrection and his inauguration of God's New Creation in our Eucharistic gathering. As Christians since at least St Benedict have realized,⁴ *the worship of God through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, is holy work. Worship is not simply rest!*

- So *what is our Anglican sabbath, when we honor God with our time and our rest?* Our Prayer Book beautifully answers the question in the Collect for *Saturdays*. (They are printed on the insert included with your worship bulletin / you might want to take this home with you, to put up on your refrigerator door, for next Saturday morning!) I invite you to pray the words with me:

A Collect for *Saturdays*

Almighty God, who after the creation of the world rested from all your *works* and sanctified a day of *rest* for all your creatures: Grant that we, *putting away all earthly anxieties*, may be duly prepared for the service of your sanctuary, and that our *rest* here upon earth may be a preparation for the eternal rest promised to your people in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*⁵



James Tissot, *The Woman With an Infirmity of Eighteen Years*

Luke 13:10-17

Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Notes

¹ See BCP:427.

² See Luke 13:10-17; note the parallel with the use of the number "18" in the same chapter, in verses 4-5.

³ See Paul's words in Romans 8:18-25.

⁴ See *The Rule of St Benedict*, many sections.

⁵ See *Book of Common Prayer*, page 99.