

March 8 2015 – Missing Miracles for the “Signs” – Caitie Daphtary, O.R.L. seminary intern

The Jesus we encounter in this gospel reading is eccentric...to say the least.

He is not congenial.

He is not sensitive to Temple etiquette and...

...certainly unconcerned about his public image.

What would be our response if this Jesus, unannounced, burst in here now and caused a similar scene to the one in our passage?

A homeless and unusually zealous man with a carpenter’s education infiltrating Memorial Church, completely violating the sacred atmosphere of worship as usual while deigning to call himself the Son of God...

At the very least, our reaction would be similar to that of the bewildered onlookers at the Temple.

Who does this guy think he is? What, if anything, is the source of his authority to act like he owns this place? And why on earth would he expect us to listen to him?

Ask him to show us a sign!

Strangely, in demanding such a sign (a credential, a piece of insignia, a list of references and testimonials) from this eccentric visitor, we would be missing the invaluable gifts of his divine presence and message – the presence and words of one who knows the ins and outs of the Great Mystery of God that houses of worship like this are constructed to mediate.

(Pause)

Our reaction to Jesus would, however, be quite understandable.

In this particular instance, his behavior is so uncouth that asking for a sign would be the most polite of possible reactions.

Furthermore, we humans are sign-producing-sign-seeking creatures who have always needed “signs” of authority to organize ourselves.

Such symbols allow us to make our competencies and experiences palpable to others, and the importance of such symbols, I’m sure, is especially felt at Stanford.

Our credentials tell a vital story to our communities, peers, and colleagues.

However, as was just illustrated in this hypothetical example about Jesus, an emphasis on external images can obscure important realities if left totally unchecked.

As with any *limited* thing, surface “signs” can become an idol when extended beyond their limits.

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(Pause)

As someone who lacks the credentials of most folks in this room, the layers of irony here are rich.

When it seemed that God was leading me to speak on the subject of “signs” with you today, you better believe I resisted until the bitter end.

“Talk about signs of authority at Stanford? Are you kidding? No way, God. Won’t do it. Uh uh...”

But, the divine has a way – which I’m sure many of you know – of pushing us into uncomfortable places for the sake of sacred work.

In preparing this message, I had to wrestle with my own attachments to outward appearance, sacrifice some of my pride, in hope that the essence of this Word would be nourishment to the people here at UPW – and **this is my sincere prayer.**

This said, I do believe today’s gospel reading challenges us to **expand our spiritual vision**, to adhere to a broader, more faithful, frame of reference that attends to more than surface appearance.

As the passage reads, “When [Jesus] was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because *they saw the signs that he was doing*. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone” (Jn 2:23-25).

The festival celebrants’ scope of vision is limited to Jesus’ outer “signs” of authority: culturally constructed external markers designed to elicit approval and buy-in...in this case, recognizable miracles and wonders.

Jesus, on the other hand, can see holistically. He needs no superficial testimonials to recognize the trustworthiness of others; “he himself [knows] what [is] in everyone.”

What makes the difference? What is the source of this disparity of sight, and what does it mean for us as spiritual practitioners?

I would humbly submit that the answer to these questions is found in the primary plea of this passage – **the renewal of faith** – and Jesus’ words and actions here provide us with a glimpse of what such renewal entails.

Most overtly, Jesus rails against mistaking commodified demonstrations of faith (the buying, selling, and sacrificing of animals) for sincere devotion to God.

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As he shouts to the crowd after driving out the sheep and cattle, scattering the coins of the moneychangers, and overturning their tables, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” (Jn 2:16).

He has apparently brought neither money to the Temple nor a sacrificial animal to offer, but his reverence and spiritual zeal, the products of his perfect faith, are palpable.

And, although Jesus’ outburst is radical, his admonition is far from unprecedented in Jewish tradition.

Currents of such reform are replete in words of the Old Testament prophets such as Amos 5:22-24: “*Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*” (Amos 5:22-24).

Jesus, drawing on this prophetic tradition, calls onlookers to align themselves fully with the intention of Jewish law, righteous action in the sight of God, to recall the primacy of a “contrite heart,” which as Psalm 51 declares, is the sacrifice God finds most acceptable (Ps 51:16-17).

These admonitions challenge us as spiritual practitioners to **deepen our faith by expanding our vision**, zooming out...ceasing the myopic fixation on our *appearance before others and getting real about how we appear before God*.

(Pause)

I think we all have a sense of what spiritual integrity looks like, but I want to offer the following illustration.

You know that fictional character in the Verizon commercials? The one who asks, “Can you hear me now?” takes two steps to the right or left and then asks again, “What about now?”

That’s faithfulness right there.

True faith, in my opinion, is a **consistent returning to an ultimate frame of reference** – seeking as often as possible to view the present moment through the eyes of the holy.

Am I aware of God now?what about now?

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And, of course, if you do not consider God to be your “ultimate ground of being,”¹ then whatever is ultimate to you applies here – be it Truth, Love, Peace.
Am I aware of Truth now? ...peace? ...Love?

(Pause)

In a culture particularly obsessed with “signs,” it can become tempting to lose sight of our connection to the ultimate when we are constantly having to appear competent and capable before others.

And this is where the gospel passage is both challenging and profoundly instructive. It offers us a glimpse of **how not** to lose sight of the ultimate, how to maintain spiritual integrity, when all eyes are on us and the temptation is to perform, to behave, to be good for others...at the expense of staying connected to source.

When asked by the pilgrims at the Temple, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” Jesus answers, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn 2:18-19), which we are told by the evangelist is meant to foreshadow the crucifixion and resurrection of the ‘temple’ of Jesus’ body.

In his reply, it seems that Jesus has totally avoided the request for a sign. He performs no dazzling miracles, produces no ‘credentials,’ quotes no prophetic passages of the Jewish canon. Instead he confronts onlookers with a claim so superficially ridiculous as to render himself even more unintelligible. “Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

As readers of this gospel, we are aware of miraculous “signs” Jesus is capable of performing – the transformation of water into wine, in fact, has just taken place prior Jesus’ entrance to Jerusalem.

If he has at his disposal the ability to dazzle his audience and lay all doubts of his authority to rest, why would he refuse to do so and avail these people of his invaluable teachings?

...perhaps, because to produce such a sign would be to deviate from the perfect faith, the total spiritual integrity that he embodies, and in so doing undermine his message to others to reform their own faith.

¹ Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980), 22.

“Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up” is an honest and, perhaps, the most authentic answer to the question of Jesus’ source of authority.

It is true to his ultimate conviction that “the Father who dwells in [him] does his works” (Jn 14:10), true to the God that is the source of his actions at the Temple and the object of his zeal. God, who is capable of all things – including Jesus’ resurrection – is the power behind Jesus’ authority.

And in this declaration, Jesus’ adherence to God and God’s will as **his ultimate frame of reference** is so complete that God’s work in the world and Jesus’ are inseparable.

“...in three days I will raise it up.”

This reply also implicitly models the kind of perfectly internalized faith about which Jesus is teaching.

He is ever united with God. As he says in chapter 14, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (Jn 14:11).

He has no need to “sell” his divine authority to anyone at this moment.

God is his “ultimate ground of being”² and any other source of authority he might claim would not only be false, it would be idolatrous and ridiculous.

Can you imagine Jesus, when asked for a sign, righteously pulling out his curriculum vitae?

Jesus Christ – Son of God; Education – Joseph of Nazareth’s School of Carpentry;
Work Experience – Miracle healer, Itinerant Preacher, Community Activist (and so on...)

Mmmmm...no.

Jesus is not interested in pleasing people here. He is interested in pleasing God.

As he says to the Pharisees in chapter 8, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I judge no one” (Jn 8:14-15).

Jesus knows his authority is from God, and in his perfect faithfulness, his perfect connectedness to God, he finds his answer to be plenty sufficient, even though it is *profoundly non-conformist*.

Jesus is not avoiding the question. He is answering it loud and clear.

He is sincerely offering the Temple-goers the most fitting ‘sign’ for this occasion, it’s just completely unlike the conventional “sign” they are seeking.

Jesus is not looking to preserve his image; he is doing the work of God.

² Groome, 22.

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As he says in John chapter 5: “I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (Jn 5:30).

Lastly, as an aside, I find it interesting that although Jesus performs miracles throughout the Gospel of John, they are hardly ever called “signs” on the lips of Jesus – who prefers to call them “works.”³

“Signs” are for others, not for Jesus. As he says, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe” (Jn 4:48).

(Pause)

Emulating Jesus’ radical faith is a profound challenge, since the temptation to fixate on “signs” is ever present.

We are constantly being measured, scrutinized, pressured to produce “signs” to indicate our authoritativeness in practically every area of our lives.

As students, professionals, and community members we are always on call, on display, just *on...*having to ensure ourselves and others through the signs of authority we produce, that we are worth listening to, working with, believing in...

As I have said, these signs of authority are not unimportant; they have their place.

We have to perform, take tests, write resumes, accumulate credentials, etc. in order to secure jobs and effectively do our worldly duties.

The problem is not the signs themselves, it is the fact that they so easily can become **ultimate** to us – all that we see – obscuring the divine in all its *eccentric* glory.

What is at stake if we do not expand our vision, recalibrate our faith?

...we miss the ultimate dimensions of our own being.

I stand before you as someone firmly held and sustained by her faith – the aspect of my being for which I am most grateful and in which I am most invested.

These commitments, however, have not always been so strong.

When I was a student in undergrad, I experienced a major health crisis that resulted in debilitating pain and inability to work.

³ Ruth Edwards, *Discovering John*, (London: SPCK, 2003), 50.

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Ironically, however, the most significant pain of this period was not physical; it was psychological.

I had internalized the belief that the “signs” I produced – my grades and credentials – were an ultimate indicator of my worth and authority, and therefore to cease producing “signs” was in essence, to die.

If I couldn’t persuade persons of my worthiness through outward displays, how was I to experience my own value?

Painful as it was to loosen my attachment to constructing images of myself, it was in doing so that I began to discover the actual sources of my worth and authority.

I bared witness to my strength and willingness to learn and transform.

I explored the uncharted belief-systems that contributed to my emotional anguish, and through this process started to recognize the constructedness of much that I had called “truth” – a discovery with ultimate implications.

Most importantly, I probed the depths of my own being and began to concentrate on my relationship to the divine.

Physically forced to cease producing “signs,” I was given the opportunity to recalibrate my faith – take a look at that which I *treated* as ultimate in practice (my grades, performances, etc.) and that which my mind, heart, and soul recognize as such...

I view this turning point as a moment of saving grace, because things could very easily have been different, had I not been made to step back, zoom out, reflect...

Apart from missing the miraculous and ultimate in our own being, if we do not broaden our vision to include more than the surface “signs,” **we also miss the depth, the invaluable and often hard-won spiritual profundity, in others.**

Perhaps there are some among us, like Mark Bertolini, the C.E.O. of Aetna Insurance who, in 2004 had a near death experience from a skiing accident that rendered his left arm useless and in perpetual, agonizing pain. He miraculously recovered and since his ordeal, his behaviors have looked little like the “signs” of authority we would expect of a capable and competent C.E.O.

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In his interview with *New York Times*, he is pictured eccentrically wearing an amulet that says “sohum,” which in Sanskrit “means ‘I am that,’” a word that “signifies a divine connection with the universe.”⁴ Perhaps this amulet is a window into Mr. Bertolini’s expanded vision?

Quoting David Gilles, author of the *New York Times* article, since 2004 Bertolini...

“...has offered free yoga and meditation classes to Aetna employees [and] more than 13,000 workers have participated. He began selling the same classes to the businesses that contract with Aetna for their health insurance. And in January...[he] gave his lowest-paid employees a 33 percent raise.”⁵

His bizarre actions have indeed raised eyebrows, elicited eye rolls, and even flack from publications like the *Harvard Business Review*, and Bertolini himself recognizes the discrepancy between his visible decision-making and the normative “signs” of competent management others expect from him. He says, “We program C.E.O.s to be certain kinds of people. We expect C.E.O.s to be on message all the time...The grand experiment here has been how much of that do you really need to do?”⁶

Surprising as it may be, the results of Mr. Bertolini’s actions have been objectively “successful” by all measurable means.

Indeed, he has invaluable insights that he now brings to the authority he wields.

What I invite us to note here is that for every Mr. Bertolini that exists, there are myriad others with wisdom and transformative insight wrangled from the deep places within their souls, people with profound **spiritual breadth of vision** who are also scoffed at because they appear quirky, out of touch...even untrustworthy at surface level.

Real spiritual integrity, as Jesus shows us, is easy to look passed when all we’re searching for is the normative “signs” competence.

The greatest teachers of faith in my life have been individuals who society would readily overlook.

⁴ David Gilles, “At Aetna, a C.E.O.’s Management by Mantra,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2015, accessed February 28, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/business/at-aetna-a-ceos-management-by-mantra.html?smid=tw-nytimes&_r=0.

⁵ Gilles, “At Aetna, a C.E.O.’s Management by Mantra.”

⁶ Ibid.

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They are folks who lack education, some of whom cannot work, and yet they have a faith that has not only sustained them through incredible trauma, it has become a source of hope and inspiration to others, including myself.

My prayer for everyone in this community is that we grant ourselves and one another permission to wear loosely the “signs” we produce, open ourselves to the joy, abundance, and freedom that comes with an expansion of vision beyond such limiting signs, and that we extend grace to others, holding out the possibility that those among us we least expect bear wisdom that has the potential to transform us entirely.

I invite you to bring to mind that which is ultimate to you and to hold fast to it.

(Pause)

I leave us with these words from Psalm 19, which we have heard today. “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer” (Ps 19:41).