

Sign Language

John 3:16

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This past week a group of ten from Dunn's Corners traveled from Westerly, Rhode Island to Winthrop, Maine to do a summer mission trip. As we made the 240 mile drive I was on the lookout for church signs and billboards, wondering if we would encounter anything of interest. Religious signs are often creative and sometimes humorous, and I admit I get a kick out of a good church sign. There are websites devoted to sayings that have been used on signs, like:

- No trespassing...prosecutors will be baptized
- God is the Potter...not Harry
- Don't let worries kill you...let the church help
- There are some questions that can't be answered by Google
- Let us help you study for your final exams
- Whoever stole our AC units, keep one...it's hot where you're going
- Need a lifeguard...ours walks on water
- God should be our steering wheel...not our spare tire
- Whoever is praying for snow...please stop
- Too hot to change the church sign...come inside for message
- We are not Dairy Queen, but we have great Sundays
- I was addicted to the Hokey Pokey, but I turned myself around
- The most powerful position is on your knees
- God answers knee mail

A while back there was a series of billboards designed to get attention and maybe encourage people to reconnect with God.

- We need to talk. God
- If you must curse, use your own name. God
- It's a small world...I know. I made it. God

There was one aimed at getting people to give God as much attention as they give to Sunday football games.

- Let's meet at my house Sunday before the game. God

As much as I admire the ones that are humorous or have a catchy phrase, the ones that stand out the most to me are the ones that are able in just a few words to convey the heart of the gospel.

- That love thy neighbor thing. I meant it. God
- You have one new friend request...from Jesus
- If God had a refrigerator your picture would be on it
- I love you...I love you...I love you. God

Even though billboards and church signs are relatively recent innovations, especially compared to a faith that is thousands of years old, it seems like there has been an interest in signs from the earliest moments that humans have been in relationship with God. Our opening sentences this morning were from Psalm 19, a beautiful psalm in which the author sees a sign from God in the heavens.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. —Psalm 19:1, 2

The heavens themselves serve as a sign for the psalmist. Observing the sun and moon and stars, the orbits of the planets, the patterns that play out day by day and night after night, the author finds the heavens are a sign of God's order in the universe. Surely this is a God with a plan and a purpose. Later the same psalm will reflect on the law of the Lord. As the heavens are perfect, so is the law of the Lord. When it comes to signs from God, the incredible universe in which we live is a pretty potent sign. The same is true of God's commandments.

Our Old Testament lesson was of a man in search of a sign. God called Gideon to lead the Israelites against their foe the Midianites. Gideon is willing, but he wants to know if it is really God calling him. So he asks in Judges 6:17, "If I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me." Later Gideon seeks a further sign as he spreads his fleece on the threshing floor. "If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know...." Seeking an additional sign, he then asks, "Now, if you can make the fleece dry and the let the ground be covered with dew..." Gideon wanted a sign that it was God calling him, preparing him, equipping him, and sending him.

If God has been in the habit of showing signs, from the sprawling majesty of the heavens to his written words that give order and meaning to life, from the ladder that appeared to Jacob to the fleece of Gideon, I wonder why Jesus gets so bent out of shape by a simple request from some Pharisees and teachers of the law. These religious leaders came up to him in Matthew 12 and asked, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you." Jesus practically blasts them as he says, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign!" What's going on here? Hasn't God been giving signs since the beginning of time? Haven't people been asking God for signs since the beginning of time?

To me this incident with the Pharisees and teachers of the law points out the danger of signs. Signs are meant to prove God. When God gives the sign, the appropriate response is to believe, to trust, to follow, to obey the God who gives the sign. But sometimes no matter what sign God gives, humans can be not only slow to believe, they can choose not to believe. The request for a sign that gets Jesus so upset comes in Matthew 12. The religious leaders ask him for a sign...as if his whole ministry has not been one huge sign, a dramatic display of God at work in the life of his Beloved Son.

That is just about what Jesus said to the disciples of John the Baptist when they came in Matthew 11 with a question from John, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." It is as if Jesus says, "The signs are everywhere, and in everything I say and do." At the same time, Jesus as much as admits it is hard to move from seeing the signs to trusting in him. "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me." Jesus knows it is not an easy thing to see a sign and immediately make the move to trusting. Somehow God has to help us have the faith to move from the sign to the sign giver. Jesus recognizes that. But with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, they seem to have hard hearts. It seems that no matter what Jesus does, what sign he gives, they will refuse to believe, to trust, to follow, and to obey. For people such as these there will be no sign.

But for those who are earnestly seeking God, longing to hear from God, desiring to see God, in God's grace and mercy it seems he puts signs in our lives. Some signs, like the sun and moon and stars above are there for us to see every single day and every single night. Other signs come once in a while, maybe even rarely, but they come and they touch our lives in deep ways.

When I chose my title for this sermon, it was meant to spark your interest. Sign Language has taken on a new meaning for our congregation. Several years ago Kathy Koziol was singing a beautiful song called, "El Shaddai." As always Kathy's face was glowing with the love of God and the song was filling our hearts with joy. But on this particular Sunday Kathy had asked Mary Slattery to sign the song she was singing. As Kathy sang and Mary signed, there was someone in the congregation who took the singing and the signing as a sign from God. Charlie Allen listened and watched, and when it was over he felt like God had given him a sign. The woman living next to Charlie happened to be deaf. Her name is Phyllis. Charlie started asking questions of Phyllis and Mary, if I invited my friend to church, would you....and if my friend at church signed the service would

you...and one day Phyllis was sitting in church and Mary was standing up front and our life as a church has not been the same since. I'm so glad Charlie did not ignore the sign God gave him. The sign wasn't just for him. When Phyllis met with our Session she said she has wanted to have a church where she could worship for nearly twenty years, but no church near her had sign language. The sign was not only for Charlie. It was for Phyllis. But it was also for Mary, who has this amazing gift and now has the opportunity to share it. And some others in church have expressed interest in sign language, and are working on it, and on Sunday morning when Mary is signing and Phyllis is watching, this whole congregation joins in, and the Spirit of God is present in powerful ways.

Our church in Houston had a Sunday evening worship service. One night a woman walked in I had never met. She had never been to our church before. As we talked, she said her heart was broken because her adult child had died. She just needed to know there was hope. She came to church seeking some sign of God's presence at a time when she felt so empty and alone. Right about then one of our long time members arrived. We had been having this Sunday night service for several years, and in all those years this particular member never attended the Sunday night service. She came that night. Talk about a sign. This member knew the pain this woman was experiencing. She too had lost a daughter. For several minutes these two talked face to face and shared heart to heart and walked a journey few have to face. The member, who knew the deep sadness of losing a child, was able to affirm that even in loss and sorrow Jesus Christ meets us with his resurrection and life. The church member never came again to a Sunday night service, and we never saw the visitor again. But for that moment, for that particular moment, God brought these two together for a time of healing and hope. God's sign language is mysterious, and in the mystery we discover God's amazing grace.

One year the youth group from that church went to camp. They joined together with 200 other youth for a weekend retreat. On that retreat, a girl got up to give her testimony. She was a high school student. It turned out her mom had died not too long ago. With tears she told of how alone she felt. And then she told how God had come to her and comforted her. As she was telling her story a butterfly flew into the room. You know how beautiful a butterfly is. It circled around the room, and people listened to the girl and they watched the butterfly. Slowly the butterfly made its way to where the girl was talking. Then it landed on her. And it stayed. The butterfly is a symbol of resurrection. From what I heard, everybody who left that meeting place that day left in reverent quiet, silenced by God's amazing grace. It was a beautiful sign from God.

The religious leaders asked Jesus for a sign, but they didn't really want a sign. They didn't want to believe in him. They didn't want to follow him. They didn't want a butterfly. They didn't want the blind to see. They just wanted to test him. So Jesus said, "There will be no sign." Except that is not all that Jesus said to them that day. He said, "There will be no sign except...except the sign of Jonah." Jonah lived in the belly of a great sea creature for three days. When Jesus says he will give the sign of Jonah, he then says, "The Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Even for those who are testing Jesus, he will give one sign. Thankfully, he gives it not only for those who test. He also gives it for those who are desperately seeking a sign from God of God's power and God's presence, and the ability of God to bring peace. He gives the sign to those who are longing to know their life is not without meaning and purpose. He gives the sign for those who just want to know that they are loved and accepted. He gives the sign not only for those who test him. He gives it for people like you and me who want to trust him.

The cross is that sign. The cross is a sign of the death of Jesus. The cross is a sign of the suffering and shame Jesus endured. But the cross is more than a sign of defeat. It is a sign of God's victory over sin and death, for the cross is empty. It is empty just like the tomb. Jesus died, and just like he said he spent three days and nights in the heart of the earth. But then...but then God gave a sign that he was with Jesus. And he gave a sign that through Jesus, he was with us. God raised Jesus from the dead, and now the cross is a sign of God's love. God's love will always be with us and God's love will always be for us. I think it is so wonderful that if you look up what the American Sign Language for Jesus is, you will find that to do the sign for Jesus you touch the tip of the middle finger of your right hand in the center of the palm of your left hand. And then you touch the tip of the middle finger of your left hand into the palm of your right hand. They even give a memory aide: Think of the nails through His palms while on the cross.

Do you want to know God's sign language? Look at the cross. His hands were pierced for us, to forgive us, to heal us, to embrace us, and to love us.

Julie and I love a series of talks given by Nicky Gumbel describing experiences people had as they participated in a study called The Alpha Course. In one of the talks Nicky tells a story about a man who drank too much. Things got so bad his wife asked him to leave. Pretty soon he was alienated from nearly everyone. A business friend asked if he ever considered Alpha. He answered, "Why would I go to that? I am an atheist." A week later another friend suggests he give Alpha a try, and he agrees to attend. During the first Alpha class as people are introducing themselves, he comments on the video which spoke of eternal life. He says, "Why would I want eternal life. I had cancer when I was thirty, and life has been a difficult and painful experience for me. Why would I want to live forever?" Nicky said that cast quite a pall on the rest of the discussion.

But the man's life changed and he prayed to receive Christ. He received the love of his Heavenly Father. Then he went and told his wife about it. She nodded knowingly and said, "Don't worry. You'll get over it. Just like golf and hunting, you'll give it up soon." Well, he didn't give it up. He didn't get over it. And his wife noticed a change. Soon she had welcomed him back home, and not long after she took part in Alpha. Then one afternoon the man saw his two young boys playing in the back yard. They had taken two large branches and tied them together in the shape of the cross. The man came out and asked with concern what the boys were doing. They looked at him and said, "We are making a cross to thank Jesus for bring you back to our family." They tied two sticks together in the shape of the cross. It was a sign to them of how God brought their father back. It was a sign to them of how God healed their family and made it whole. It was a sign to them of the love of God.

What is the cross to you? In my heart of hearts, I hope it is a sign to you of a God whose love for you knows no bounds. I hope it is a sign to you that your life matters. I hope it is a sign to you that there is hope in the midst of the darkest days and the most discouraging situations you might face, or our world might face. I hope it is a sign to you and to me and to every single one of us, of the God who loved the world so much that he gave his One and Only Son, that whoever believes in him would not perish, but would have everlasting life. I hope you will forever and for always cherish the cross, the sign of God's great love.