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Believing Without Seeing

John 4:46-54

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Yesterday we had the pleasure of stopping by several homes of BBC students who are graduating today. One of things Jill and I enjoy seeing this time of year on the Cape are the signs folks put up to celebrate their children graduating from high school. You see them on sheets; you see them on plywood, and other materials. Some look professionally done, others are lovingly and obviously home made.

The signs point to an accomplishment and a person. They highlight a significant event in a family's life that will not be forgotten.

Today's Gospel story is about a sign, not one to celebrate a graduation, but one that pointed to a person and an accomplishment. The sign was done by Jesus; the accomplishment was the healing of a little boy that led to a household believing in Jesus, a significant event in a family's life that was never forgotten.

In fact, it is a story that has been shared for almost 2,000 years.

"46 Then he came again to **Cana** in Galilee where he had changed the water into wine. Now there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum. 47 When he **heard** that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. 48 **Then Jesus said to him, "Unless you (plural "you people") see signs and wonders you (plural "you people") will not believe."** 49 The official said to him, "*Sir, come down before my little boy dies.*" 50 Jesus said to him, "**Go; your son will live.**" **The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him** and started on his way. 51 As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive. 52 So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, "*Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him.*" 53 The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, "*Your son will live.*" **So he himself believed, along with his whole household.** 54 Now this was **the second sign** that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee."

Signs are very beneficial in life. Think about how much more difficult it would be to drive on the Cape at night, if there were no signs indicating when the road turned, no signs indicating which street was which, no signs telling you what direction you were going in – well come to think of it – on parts of Route 28 that wouldn't be all bad. Signs are helpful when we are driving, especially in an unfamiliar place.

When it comes to our health, our body gives us signs that we need to pay attention to. Pain is a sign that something is going on that we should deal with sooner

rather than later. I can't tell you how many times I have been at the ER or in a hospital with someone and asked, "*What happened?*" and they or their loved one said something like, "*Well this hurt and I had this pain, but I didn't want to go to the doctor or bother anyone...*" They ignored the signs. Men are notorious for doing this and the result is often something worse happening than if we had heeded the signs when they first appeared.

Today's scripture is about a sign that John hopes is helpful for us as we navigate the road of life. While more and more people today have a GPS in their car, John's Gospel encourages us to have a JPS – a Jesus Positioning System that guides us and helps us make decisions about the direction we're going. The healing of the royal official's son is the first miracle of healing in John's Gospel and Jesus' **second sign**; like the first sign it takes place in Cana. There are a number of signs in John's Gospel and they all point us toward believing in Jesus as the Son of God who can change our life.

"Sign" is the term John uses to designate Jesus' amazing deeds. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the term "sign" in relation to Jesus' marvelous acts, is mostly given a negative connotation. Doubters and opponents of Jesus ask him to perform a sign (like a trained seal) to convince them of his identity and he reprimands them for the request (see Matthew 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-13; 12:38-42; Luke 11:16-17, 29-32). The interest in seeing a sign *first* as a basis for faith is condemned as an act of distrust and suspicion.

However, in the fourth gospel signs are seen as acts of Jesus that provide insight into Jesus' true identity. A sign tells us something – a street sign tells us where we are, a stop or one-way street sign tells what to do or what not to do. Signs communicate information.

In John, the signs of Jesus communicate information about who he is. They are expressions of the power of God that produce faith. Seeing signs is more than visually seeing something Jesus does or benefiting from those acts.

It is insight into the identity of the performer of the sign, it is grasping that this person is more than a wonder-worker. He is the Christ, the Father's unique Son.

In the Gospel of John there are people who see the signs of Jesus in two different ways. Some folks see the signs and focus on how Jesus fills human needs while others see the signs and perceive that they point to Jesus as the Son of God.

Signs in John's gospel are a way of provoking faith in people, even if some folks don't get it and only see or look for the physical benefit. The old saying, "*Seeing is believing*" contains a realistic idea: Our belief in anything must have some basis in

experience. We ordinarily believe something on the basis of the kind of experience that gives us a reason to believe. However, the relationship of faith and experience is a subtle one. A degree of faith is often required *before* we find in our experience the elements that support what we believe. Faith is made credible by experience, but before we can understand our experience in a way that supports faith, we almost need to have a little faith.

The father in the gospel story takes the time to travel from Capernaum to Cana because he has at least some little level of faith, based on what he has heard that Jesus might be able to save his son. The very nature of faith is a willingness to trust some claim to truth in expectation that experience will verify the truth. In a sense there are two kinds of faith: **Pre-experiential faith** precedes or comes before an experience that supports believing. **Experiential faith** is faith that results from experience.

Anyone who has fallen in love should be able to relate to this – when we are falling in love we go through levels of trust, vulnerability, and sharing where we have faith that someone may feel a certain way about us and we hope that our experience will prove that to be true.

For every Christian since the generation that physically saw, ate with, heard, and walked with Jesus – the issue of faith, believing, and seeing has been vital. We cannot have an experiential faith in the same way as John, Andrew, Mary or Martha or the man in today's story. For us, faith comes more through hearing and believing rather than seeing. The official traveled nearly a day's journey and pleaded with Jesus face to face to come because his son was at the point of death and Jesus might be the one to heal him. Notice a few things about this man and how he is like so many of us.

He was seeking Jesus because he was desperate. Some folks don't come to Jesus until they are desperate, even a matter of life and death. As long as things are going along well, they don't see the need or purpose. It is nice not to wait until things are that bad, but each person is different.

He ended up receiving more than he hoped for or even knew he needed.

When we come to Jesus we end up receiving more than we hope for and more than we even knew we needed.

His expectations were not met, Jesus didn't go with him, but Jesus promised that his son would live.

This is a hard because sometimes our expectations are not met, God doesn't act the way we think the Lord should, sometimes our loved ones aren't healed and don't always

live. Yet we are encouraged to trust and have faith even in the face of events that make it hard to do so.

The man received the gift of his son's life and the gift of faith in Jesus.

Sometimes we see answers to prayer and people have lived longer, survived things, sometimes they don't but we can look for the gifts we have received and receive through that person. We also can receive the gift of faith in Jesus that gives us hope and strength.

In the fourth gospel some people see the signs or miracles of Jesus and can't get beyond the physical act – water into wine, a seriously ill boy is revived. Folks with this perspective can't get beyond, "Look what Jesus can *do*."

John's hope is that when a miraculous act or sign of Jesus is fully understood, it causes us to say, "Look at *who Jesus is*."

He is the giver of generous abundant gifts as we saw last Sunday (John 2:1-11).

He is the giver of life, not only to the boy in today's story, but to all of us.

As the giver of abundance and life (John 10:10), Jesus points to, is a sign of who God is and this is the basis for faith.

Signs direct us to faith, they show us that God is present and real and active in human life. There are signs all around us today as well.

Folks say seeing is believing, but the man first believed Jesus' word without seeing a miracle and following his JPS he turned around and started home. The "Royal Official's" identity is surprisingly ambiguous, which helps him represent believers of any background. His faith is *confirmed by a sign, not based on a sign*. Faith based on hearing is the context in which Jesus' signs can be rightly perceived. The royal official heard and believed – this is the pattern John wants us to follow. The word "**Believe**" **occurs 57 times in John's Gospel and "Believed" another 24 times.**

In 1970 a rather obscure musical group the Five Man Electrical Band, released a song called *Signs* that I always liked. The song refers to negative signs like, "Long haired freaky people, need not apply," "No trespassing," "You've got to have a membership card to get inside." The last verse is my favorite, it is about a church: "*And the sign said everybody welcome, come in, kneel down and pray But when they passed around the plate at the end of it all, I didn't have a penny to pay, so I got me a pen and a paper and I made up my own little sign. I said thank you Lord for thinking about me, I'm alive and doing fine.*"

God is thinking about each one of us. Our Creator gives us signs all the time that point us toward a life changing faith in and relationship with Jesus. Follow the signs and believe and you will find love, guidance, direction, hope and power for living. The more we come to believe, the more we will see. We also are to remember that we are to be signs for others to point them to Jesus.