

'Wisdom hidden from the wise'

Jamie Manson | Sep. 24, 2009

The more I read the gospel, the more I am struck by the idea that God loves a good scandal.

The gospels give us narrative after narrative of unlikely heroes, people who live on the margins of society who become model disciples. Those who *hear* God's word and *see* God at work in the world are almost always those that you would least expect. It's likely that the ancient communities who first heard these stories were very much aware of how radical they are. How did we come to forget this vital lesson?

Our familiarity with the gospel stories diminishes their scandalous and subversive meanings. Take, for example, the stories leading up to Jesus' birth. Mary is a fourteen-year-old, unwed, pregnant girl who is betrothed to a man twice her age. They are homeless and being hunted down by the police of the day. They are so poor and displaced that she isn't allowed the dignity of giving birth inside of a house. Instead, she is forced to deliver her baby into an open-air barn, surrounded by livestock. This is how God chooses to come into the world.

Jesus doesn't exit any more gloriously. Thirty-three years later, the same Mary has a son on death row, and is forced to stand by powerlessly and watch him be executed like a common criminal. This is gritty stuff. As Catholics, Mary is often most identified as the blessed virgin, conceived without sin. And yet, her story is so much more radical and powerful. Mary is the first of a host of the unlikely heroes (many of them women) that we encounter throughout the gospel narratives. We shouldn't allow our familiarity with these stories to lessen their shocking quality.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus offers a prayer of thanksgiving to God for hiding true wisdom "from the learned and the wise, and revealing them to the simple." Women and slaves, lepers and street people, lowly Roman soldiers and tax collectors understand Jesus' teaching and example. The privileged men, most especially the religious leaders, never do. Those who are supposedly the most learned, the most authoritative, the most scholarly, the most religious, and the most powerful understand very little, if anything at all, of God's presence in the world.

I recently saw a segment on the television version of National Public Radio's "[This American Life](#) [1]" that demonstrated a striking insight into this gospel theme. (Ironically, the program is broadcasted on Showtime ...) The piece tells the story of Ben McPherson, an artist and devout Mormon who is creating a series of paintings depicting scenes from the life of Jesus. Ben first stages the scenes in an elaborate tableau using props and actors in period costumes. He then lights and photographs them, later using these photos as the models for his enormous, lifelike paintings. One of Ben's problems is that to make the paintings historically accurate, the men must have beards. But Mormonism frowns on facial hair, so Ben searches Utah's homeless shelters, rebel communities and anarchist cafes for bearded men to use as models for the scenes from Christ's life.

His Jesus is a Marxist graduate student in economics; the disciples are usually men from the streets or other vagabonds who have been profoundly wounded by their religion, and grow beards as a visible sign of protest against the faith tradition that harmed them. Not one of the men is paid to do this. They show up for God knows what reason, waiting for hours to pose in the desert. In doing this work, Ben has created a bit of a scandal within his Mormon community. But he continues, passionately convinced that his work glorifies God.

I think this artist understands well that true wisdom is hidden from the wise. Ben's unlikely heroes communicate an awareness and an embodiment of the power of God's presence on earth, in a way that few sermons or liturgies or theological texts ever could. The images shake the viewer at the foundations, much the way, I think, Jesus' teachings and his radical empowerment of the lowest ranks of society must have shaken the people of his time, and ought to shake us today.

We must pay very close attention to the people that God chooses to tell the story of God's working in the world. By lifting up the lowly and throwing down the mighty, Jesus constantly juxtaposed the power of God with the injustice of cultural and religious powers that categorize, marginalize, and oppress various groups in society.

Why are we so quick to forget how subversively God, through Jesus, moved in our world? I become so perplexed whenever I hear Christian fundamentalists name Jesus as their "personal Lord and Savior" and twist his radical message into a system of rigid laws, detached judgments, and labels that enforce the submission of women and the exile of GLBT people. What gospel are they reading? Who is this Jesus with whom they have a relationship?

True discipleship seems marked by the ability to see God working within those who live on the edges of society and religious communities, the way that Ben McPherson did when he sought to reveal God's presence in the world through vagabonds and anti-institution types and street people. Their bodies are God's body, too, and their stories reflect the story of God's own journey in this world.

We live in society that feeds on scandal -- we are obsessed with it, perhaps even addicted to it. It medicates and numbs us, and makes media moguls even more obscenely wealthy. Fixating on scandals distances us from our own reality, and erodes our presence to the brokenness in ourselves and one another. Our time might be better spent attuning our vision to the ways in which God is doing God's radical work in the world on the margins, through the unlikeliest of heroes, completely undermining the rules that are peddled by religious and cultural groups.

Jesus' teaching and example calls us to create scandals: scandals that compel us to challenge our religious authorities, scandals that propel us to seek justice for those living on the edge of society, scandals that force us to see the face of God in the faces of people that we would rather not see at all. These scandals are rooted in love, in a desire to see all human beings flourish without shame, and are grounded in the gospel belief that wisdom of God is revealed in the unlikeliest places and people.

Jamie Manson received her master of divinity degree from Yale Divinity School. She currently serves as director of Social Justice Ministries at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, working primarily with New York City's homeless and poor populations. She is a member of the national board of the Women's Ordination Conference.

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[1] <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/>