

Living beyond code compliance

It's baseball season, and whether you find the sport the most divinely inspired game that makes America the beautiful or you think it's more boring than watching the outfield grass grow, you can't deny that the season is upon us and that its presence—at least where I live—reminds us that there is an annual tension between hope and experience. The teams I have rooted for in my lifetime are mostly the Minnesota Twins and the San Diego Padres.

Draw your own conclusions.

But it's not team misery that I'm thinking about right now.

Great teams and awful teams have some things in common. The one I'm thinking about is that all teams, when their side is up to bat, place a coach near third base. That coach relays what are supposed to be secret signals to the batters and to the base runners. The coach might tell the batter, for instance, that he should bunt the next pitch, or he might tell the runner on first base to steal second base. But the coach doesn't want to tell the other team what he's telling the batter or runner, so he tries to put his instructions in code. All teams do this.

The way the coach secretly instructs his players is through a series of hand motions—a hand to the belt, thigh, ear, bill of his cap, or a brushing motion against his chest. They all mean something. Or not. The other team uses the exact same motions. So it's necessary to disguise when the coach “means it” or is using the motions as a way to confuse the other team. To let his team know that the signal is for real, the coach has

what is called an “indicator” signal. He might touch his hand to his cheek, and that tells the player that the next signal is “on,” and not a fake. It's all very confusing.

Unless you're sitting on the bench, with time on your hands.

Many years ago I played on my college baseball team. We weren't particularly good, and to put my own talent in context, I was not a starter. To quell the boredom of watching our miserable team get shellacked each game, I took interest in our opponents' third base coaches.

It was a practice I picked up while riding the bench in high school and in Little League earlier in my unremarkable athletic life.

I would watch the third base coach of the other team go through the gyrations I previously explained, until I broke the code. Then I would inform our players, and they could adjust for the coming bunt, steal or other play. It is highly unethical to do this, according to some players and coaches, but mine were grateful. Challenging circumstances create new ethical standards. Think Enron. We needed every advantage we could get.

I think we treat the continuous ways God breaks into our lives the same way we look at baseball team signals. They are hidden, secret, and only for insiders like the clergy, or those with a lot of time on their hands, like the infirmed or elderly. And sometimes the signals throw us off because we don't know which one was the “indicator.” It is as if God is there, but He is hiding until we can figure out the signals He's sending. Of course this isn't true.

At the beginning of his Gospel account, John describes Jesus as being in the world without the world recognizing Him. He's already present. Whether we see Him in all things is a different matter.

“Life is this simple,” Catholic writer Thomas Merton said. “We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time.”

And sometimes (God's) signals throw us off because we don't know which one was the “indicator.”

How would our lives be different—better—if, instead of trying to decode God's signals, we simply see him where He always is, which is everywhere?

Eugene Peterson describes the process of fixing our eyes on the unseen, as opposed to the seen, this way:

“We happen upon, we notice, we reach out and touch things and ideas, people and events, and among these the Holy Scriptures themselves, that were there all along but that our ego-swollen souls or our sin-blurred eyes quite simply overlooked—sometimes for years and years and years. And then we do notice: we sight life, we realize God and hear His word, we grab the sleeve of a friend and demand, ‘Look! Listen!’”



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