

YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN

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Matthew 14:13-33 | Church of the Palms

COMMENTS ON THE LESSON

We're reading a passage from Matthew 14 that narrates some major miracles, and I'm wondering how you process these in your mind. If we could engage in some audience participation, passing a microphone to those who wanted to contribute to the discussion, we might be surprised by the variety of responses.

Some would say, "So what's the problem? If you believe in the resurrection of the body, what's the problem with the feeding of the 5000 or Jesus' walking on water?" Then there are those who can't picture how such things could happen. They can't imagine how we could ever make a movie of these events, and so place these stories in a drawer of their mind marked, "Awaiting further light?"

Let's remember that persons of good faith hear these stories in different ways, but that the real question, as always, is what these stories have to do with our daily life. Christian faith is not about how we think, but how we live. So then, how will this passage guide your life in the coming week? How is what we hear on Sunday morning connected with how we live on Monday morning?

SERMON

Let me begin by sharing with you a story that happened back in 2007, when violinist Joshua Bell was concertizing in Washington, D.C. While he was there, *The Washington Post* employed Bell for an interesting experiment. Dressed as a musician who was “down on his luck” and begging, Bell leaned against a subway wall and played on his \$3.5 million dollar Stradivarius for 45 minutes. His underground concert consisted of six glorious but difficult pieces. A hidden camera recorded the audience response to this master musician whose concerts can cost \$100 per ticket. Of the 1,097 people who walked by, 27 dropped their pocket change in Bell’s box, but walked on without stopping to enjoy the music. How many stopped long enough to listen? Seven!

You never know when you’re in the presence of greatness, in the presence of someone who is far more important than you realize, someone who is much more significant than they appear to be. Appearances can be deceiving.

When I first read this story, I glanced across the room in my study at a little framed copy of woodcut by Fritz Eichenberg that I’ve cherished for many years. I saw it first back in the early 1950s on the front page of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper. It depicts a Depression Era breadline of bedraggled men and women awaiting the day’s dole of. Standing in line with them, unnoticed, is Jesus, a halo surrounding his head. In the freezing weather, those who wait in line are so cold that they cannot notice his presence. Entitled, *The Christ of the Breadlines*. I’ve kept it as a reminder that you never know when Jesus might be standing in some waiting line – more likely at Walmart than at Lord & Taylor!

The moral of this story and this woodcut works, however, in two directions. On the one hand, you never know when you'll fail to miss the presence of some great person because of their ordinary appearance, like that of Joshua Bell or, for instance, like that old man with unkempt, shaggy gray hair, walking the streets of Princeton during my seminary years. Dressed in a baggy sweatshirt and shuffling along in sloppy slippers, he looked like some oldster who might have escaped from the locked-down unit of a nursing home. Unless you'd seen his picture in the newspaper, you'd never know that this was the theoretical physicist whose discoveries have changed the world – it was Albert Einstein!

On the other hand, you never know when someone who seems hopeless, all of a sudden, does something spectacular, like impossible Peter who, all of a sudden, walks on water. True, he did it for only a few seconds, but still, he did it. Now there's the miracle we all find difficult to believe and, more importantly, apply to our lives. We all find it difficult to believe when ordinary people somehow, "walk on water," do something extraordinary, especially those people who seem impossible. We don't want to believe that such things can happen. When we hear of some such modern day little miracle, we question whether it's true. We have a problem with impossible people, and Peter is, after all, the impossible disciple who, down the road in our story, will deny Jesus, and deny him deliberately three times. Why, in heaven's name, did Jesus ever choose someone like Peter to be one of his disciples? It makes us wonder if Jesus was a good judge of character.

Several years ago, in the middle of winter, I was visiting my oldest daughter who lives in Lewiston, NY, a quaint old town on the Niagara River, downstream from the Niagara Falls, not too far from where, farther downstream, the Niagara flows into Lake Ontario. It was a bitter cold afternoon, and I was not dressed warmly enough for winter in New York. All I remember is that I wanted to get out of the cold and looked for the nearest warm place where I could find

a moment of relief. And the nearest place open to the public was St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church, right there on the main street.

No one was in the sanctuary, so I was free to walk about, enjoying it by myself. It was then that I discovered something fascinating on the side aisle. It was a stained glass window in which Jesus is speaking to Peter, garbed as a poor fisherman, standing beside a rock. Jesus utters those familiar words, "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church" (Mt. 16:18). In the window, Jesus stands in the foreground, his back to the viewer, so that we are seeing what Jesus is seeing. Peter is facing us, and hears Jesus' words, but there is something he cannot see. What Jesus sees that Peter cannot see is far off on the distant horizon, miles and centuries beyond that moment. Off on that far horizon is the faint outline of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Peter, along with his people, struggling to survive under the crushing oppression and taxation of the Roman Empire, cannot see or imagine that someday in the heart of Rome there will be a magnificent edifice, built to the glory of Christ, but bearing Peter's name.

You never know when Jesus sees something on the horizon of an ordinary life that is grand beyond our wildest imagination. That is what Jesus sees on the horizon of every human life. There are no ordinary people; off on the horizon of every life, God can be building something magnificent. You just never know when Jesus sees something that we can't see.

But let's go now from Rome to New York City for another story.

My wife, Nora, was raised on East 41st Street in midtown Manhattan. Up the street from her apartment, she could watch when the United Nations buildings were under construction. She was the daughter of Dr. Ernest Palen who, from 1932-1972, was pastor of the Middle Collegiate Church at 2nd Avenue at 7th Street, in what is now referred to as the East Village. Organized in 1628, it is the oldest continuously worshipping congregation in America. During the 1940s,

when old time residents were fleeing from the city into the suburbs, Dr. Palen kept this congregation alive so that, nowadays, as the East Village has become a popular place to live for young artists, actors, and musicians, the congregation is still there – indeed, vibrantly there, so that Sunday worship looks almost like the United Nations at prayer.

Dr. Palen's greatest accomplishment, however, may now be unknown to the present congregation. When Nora was growing up, her father befriended a kid who played on the nearby streets. His name was Murray, and he seemed to have a bright mind. Dr. Palen would chat with him, encourage him in his school work and, eventually, invite him into the Sunday School and children's choir, and later into the young people's group. Nora remembers Murray as a good dancer.

Murray's teen years, however, were different from that of other kids. He had to work for his mother, who was a prostitute. His job was to solicit "customers" for her. Still, Dr. Palen recognized that this street kid had a good mind, and continued to encourage him in his studies. For that matter, Murray did so well in high school that Nora's father succeeded in getting him a scholarship at Rutgers University, with a job as houseboy to the Dean of men.

Murray did very well at Rutgers, very well indeed, graduating near the top of his class, so that he went on to medical school and became a respected diagnostician and prominent doctor of internal medicine in New York City. I come close to tears whenever I tell this story. And whenever Nora tells it, she adds, "If you have just one person who believes in you, it can make all the difference." Another way to put it is, as I've said, you just never know when.

So what did Jesus see on the horizon of Peter's life when He called him to leave his fishing nets and follow? Surely, he saw ahead of time that this would be the very one who, later, would betray him. But in that very betrayal would be the seed of what Jesus knew that Peter would

become. Jesus needed someone who would fail miserably, because those who fail miserably are, more often than not, inclined to live mercifully. After all, it is because of Peter's broad and merciful vision that all of us who are Gentiles are here this morning. Did you ever realize that? (That's an entire sermon I'd like to deliver at some other time.)

When you get home today, read Acts 10. Before you read it, remember that until this point in the life of the early church, Christianity was a sect of Judaism. Those first Christians were all Jews, and there was no mission plan for sharing the good news with the Gentile, non-Jewish world. Indeed, some of those early Jewish Christians opposed opening up the church to the Gentiles. But it was Peter who, in the earliest moments of the infant church's life, had a broad and merciful vision that accounts for the fact that all of us as Gentiles are here today.

It was Peter who obeyed the vision that led him to the house of a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. And it was in that Gentile home that Peter opened the door of the church to the entire world when he said, "I now understand how true it is that God has no favorites but that in every nation those who are god-fearing and do what is right are acceptable to him." (Acts 10:34, 35).

It was for that purpose that Jesus chose impossible Peter, a disciple who would fail so miserably that he wanted to share his experience of forgiving grace with the entire world. It was Peter who finally said to the whole world, "Y'all come."

So what do you think that Jesus sees on the horizon of your life? Did it ever occur to you that Jesus sees far more on the horizon of your life that you can possibly imagine? Who me? Yes, you! You're saying, "I've had my life and now I've arrived, at last, at the final dream of retirement in Florida – and you're telling me, Mr. Preacher, that there's something bigger?" Yes! There is no retirement from discipleship!

Many years ago I had a fishing friend who sold his home in New York and moved to Florida so he could realize his dream of fishing every day. Three years later, he sold his home in Florida and moved back up north, explaining to me, "You know, Morgan, I finally realized that there's just so much fishing that a guy can do. There just must be more to life than getting up every morning with nothing more to do than have fun."

You know, you could change a child's life forever by becoming a tutor in this church's tutoring program. You could invest all that money you have in something that would really matter and actually save lives. Remember Dorothy Day's demanding formula for stewardship, "Whatever I have that I don't really need belongs to someone else" – and that applies just as much to your time and money as it does to the old clothing in your closet.

If you take only one thing away from this sermon, then take this simple prayer, "Jesus, show me what's on the horizon for my life in these years I have left."

But finally, what do you see on the horizon of some other life, especially on the life of one of those impossible people? When I use that term "impossible people," who comes to mind? Who are the impossible people in your life? Who is the impossible Peter in your life, the one who has denied you, betrayed you, let you down?

Don't ever forget one of the basics of discipleship: the measure of your love for the most impossible person in the world is the measure of your love for Jesus. Impossible people? Love them? Yes! It's even worse: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you maybe children of your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:44). "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." (Lk. 6:36).

At the heart of the faith that conquered the Roman Empire was the stubborn refusal of the earliest Christians to hate those very impossible enemies who were feeding them to the lions, burning them alive, beheading them (even worse than the horrid things that modern terrorists are doing) . After all, they were the followers of the One who prayed for those who were crucifying him, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Lk. 23:34). Jesus never gave up on anybody!

Live, instead, with the eyes of Jesus, looking on the horizon of every life, or as Quaker George Fox said, "Walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one." However impossible someone may seem, learn to say what the doorkeeper at that Benedictine monastery in Dakota says whenever he looks out the window and sees another impossibly needy soul coming down the road toward the monastery, "O Jesus! Is that you again?" After all, you just never know when it may be another Peter, or better yet, another incarnation of Jesus trying to get into your heart.

So remember impossible Peter, and put the lesson of his impossible life into practice in your daily life – and I'll try to do the same. Tomorrow afternoon, I'll head back to the RCMA Leadership Academy in Wimauma where, three afternoons every week, I tutor 8th grade Carlos San Juan who, with his little brother, Jorge, follows the crops with his mother, Maria, who works in the fields. Maria is illiterate and speaks only Spanish. It's just the three of them facing the future. What will become of them, and what will become of Carlos? Will he work in the fields, or could he become a leader of his people? I just don't know. What I do know, and what keeps me going, is the very same thing that will keep you going, that it just may be Jesus, incarnate in the life of Carlos, calling me to come and help. After all, you just never know when!