

THE GREATER WORK

Rev. Gregory Flint

Mark 6: 45 – 51

July 18, 2010

When I say, “a miracle of Jesus,” which one comes to mind? Maybe Jesus feeding five-thousand with five loaves and two fish. Or Jesus turning the water into wine at the wedding reception in Cana, which apparently was more memorable than the best-man’s toast. Or maybe you thought of the astonishing catch of fish after Jesus told them where to let down the net.

How about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead? That’s a good one. Or Jesus transferring the demons from the man into the herd of pigs. Not something you see everyday.

Or did one of the healings come to mind? – the paralytic man; the hemorrhaging woman; the ten lepers; Bartimaeus, blind from birth, given his sight by Jesus.

The Gospels record thirty-some miracles: miraculous feedings; nature miracles, like Jesus calming the sea; healings and exorcisms; raisings of the dead. Some of these can be explained...maybe. Others defy reason and our knowledge of how the world works. Many are just difficult to believe in any, “This really happened,” way.

My hunch is that both in the church and out there in non-churchdom, Jesus walking on the water makes the shortlist of best known miracles. Indeed, it’s become a common figure of speech: used as a compliment, “He walks on water”; or used as a criticism, “She thinks she can walk on water”; or used in a joking way, “When walking on water it helps to know where the rocks are.”

So what do we do with this story? - that “He came towards them...walking on the sea.”

What did the disciples see in Jesus, experience in his presence, that caused them to tell a story like this? There must have been something...extraordinary.

But what about us? The boat in the storm part, we get. Life from time to time puts us all that little boat midst an angry sea. But what about the Jesus coming across the water part? Does he still do that? If the miracles of Jesus are really about God’s power of love, do such demonstrations still happen?

The woman had been thinking about her brother in recent days. They hadn’t talked in over a year. After the death of their second parent, there’d been a misunderstanding about money. Things were said in anger and grief. Old sibling jealousies just came pouring out in accusations, followed by months of no contact.

Then for some reason, not clear to the woman, but deeply important, she picks up the phone and calls him. “I want you all to come here for Thanksgiving,” she blurts out when he answers.

“What? What did you say?” he asks.

“I want us to be together at Thanksgiving...here. We’re a family,” she says. “Will you come? It’s important.”

“Yes, he says quietly. Then he says it again, “Yes, we will come for Thanksgiving.”

Now, Greg, you’re not going to equate that phone call with Jesus walking on water, are you?

No. But if you asked Jesus about it, whatever happened that stormy night at sea...if you asked Jesus whether the walking on water thing was a greater work, requiring greater faith than the woman's phone call to her brother, what do you think Jesus would say?

The Arizona Governor signs a law making it illegal to provide assistance to an undocumented immigrant. A Phoenix congregation meets after worship to discuss what this means for the congregation's financial assistance, language tutoring, and preschool programs which include many immigrants.

Should the church start requiring citizenship and excluding those who can't prove it? Would volunteers in those programs be at risk of arrest for aiding illegal immigrants? What is required of law abiding citizens? What is required of the church?

And there is no consensus within the congregation about what public policy is best when it comes to immigration. But there is agreement that as a church they would remain open-hearted and inclusive of all. That radical hospitality would be their way. For God's love knows no boundaries and Jesus never asked to see someone's papers before he reached out to them.

So, Greg, you're not suggesting that the congregations' decision to remain inclusive is equivalent to walking on water are you?

No. But if you asked Jesus about it, about which act the world most needs now – someone who can walk on water or a community's radical hospitality – what do you think he'd say?

He always eats by himself in the middle school cafeteria. Small in stature, quiet, not part of any group, he is the perfect target for the bullies. Who this day have gathered around him. They help themselves to his bag lunch. They ask him if he's gay, queer. "Better not let us catch you in the Boy's Room," he is told. One of the bullies tears a homework page the alone one had been working on.

Then a girl gets up from a table nearby. "Stop it! Leave him alone!" She says, quivering and surprised by her own courage.

"Nobody's talking to you," one of the bullies says to her. "Why are you defending this gay freak?" another sneers.

But the girl has made a terrifying decision. She will not back down. "He is not a freak," she says stepping closer to the picked-on one. If she has to do this alone, she will.

But she isn't alone. Two more girls come from the table to stand beside her. Then two more. Then not wanting to be shown-up by the girls, four boys join them and also stand between the bullies and the bullied one.

The bullies laugh and walk away. It's not a large human rights victory, this middle school witness and act of solidarity. Certainly it doesn't qualify as any kind of miracle.

But what might Jesus say about it? Might he say that it was even better than walking on water?

At the coffee place early, a street person sits at a table trying to look invisible, wondering how long he has before he is told to buy something or leave.

A businessman with a leather briefcase on a shoulder strap, sits down at an adjacent table. He has two cups of coffee, one of which he places on the table of the street person. Out of a paper sack the businessman takes two muffins. "Hope you like blueberry," he says as he hands a muffin to the homeless man, whose face registers

stunned surprise at this act of what? – generosity, kindness, goodness, human solidarity, Jesus-likeness, Godliness.

The businessman opens the morning paper, pulls out the sports section and hands the front section to the other man. “I have to read the sports first,” the businessman says.

So they sit there, and read the paper, and drink coffee one early morning, like people do, when for a few brief, blessed moments all that divides people doesn’t matter as much as sharing coffee and a common humanity.

Again, it’s not earth-shaking, this little coffee place interaction. Most people in the place didn’t even see it. There was nothing miraculous about it.

But if Jesus had been there, watching, what do you suppose he might have said about it? If asked to compare walking on water with this coffee place act of restoring a homeless human being’s dignity, if even for a few minutes...which do you think Jesus would consider the greater work?