

A Sermon for Epiphany 5, Year B
February 5, 2006
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Jesus Christ, Loser

Recently I attended a conference at the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood. It's the largest United Methodist Church in the country; to quote Monty Python, it has "huge tracts of land." During lunch the minister of a church in Meriden, Kansas, was telling me about his trip to the Holy Land. I asked what place was most meaningful for him, expecting him to answer either the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified and buried, or the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem where Jesus was born. He replied that those places were impressive, but he was most moved at Capernaum in Galilee where Christ healed Peter's mother-in-law. Archeologists have uncovered in Capernaum the remains of a house church from the latter part of the first century, which is believed to have been built at the site of Peter's house. More than two thousand years later, Christ's miracles *still* have the power to inspire.

Now some might claim that I am standing on shaky ground by talking about Christ's miracles, *especially* the miracle told in this morning's Gospel. And there's several reasons for that. The first, of course, is that this morning's miracle *could* be offensive to women. Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law (who is not named), who then serves the men. However, this is meant to honor her, as her actions mirror those of the angels who earlier in the Gospel served (Gk. *diakoneo*) Jesus in the wilderness.

But an even more pressing issue in discussing Christ's miracles is that many Christians tend to get embarrassed when the topic is raised. Modern culture tends to disbelieve that miracles such as the one in this morning's Gospel can even occur. We contrast our scientific age rooted in empirical proof with the superstitious and ignorant time when Jesus walked the earth. People in ancient Judea did not understand scientific concepts such as micro-organisms and quantum mechanics, but since we know better we are certain that miracles such as this aren't possible. Such an attitude is reflected in the writings of the Jesus Seminar and in the novel (and soon to be a major motion picture) *The Da Vinci Code*, which both present Jesus as an itinerant preacher misunderstood by subsequent generations which mistakenly attributed totally unrealistic miracles to him.

But I suspect that trying to have Jesus without miracles is a case of throwing out the baby with the bath water. Mark is commonly accepted as the oldest of the four gospels. Even though it is the shortest gospel, there are more miracles in Mark than in each of the other three. Scholars believe that the author of Mark collected and arranged oral stories about Jesus into a new narrative form, a Gospel, about Jesus' ministry and death, and so there must have been a lot of stories circulating about Jesus as healer.

However, debating whether we are wiser than the ancient Judeans or whether the historical Jesus actually could work miracles seems to miss the point. If all Jesus did was cast out demons,

heal people, and feed crowds with a few pieces of fish and loaves of bread, then I doubt that any of us would have ever heard of him, much less gather here each Sunday morning in his name. There were other ancient miracle workers who did the same things – Apollonius of Tyana, Eleazar the Exorcist, and my favorite, Honi the Circle-drawer – but they are difficult even to find now on the internet, much less to worship as part of the Trinity. By either fixating on the miracles or trying to explain them away, we just might be paying too much attention to them.

I suspect that part of the reason for that is, well, liturgical. Our lectionary readings are set up in sections: last week we heard the story in Mark’s Gospel of Jesus casting a demon out of a man in the synagogue at Capernaum, this week we heard the story of Jesus healing Peter’s mother-in-law. We’ll continue to hear readings from Mark through Easter Sunday. Our method of reading the gospel a piece at a time doesn’t really encourage a broad view. That can be unfortunate, because we might miss the forest for the trees.

And the forest we might miss when you are concentrating on the trees is that the miracles weren’t that important in the first place. Sure, there are the early crowds mentioned in today’s reading, but as we go through the Gospel of Mark you’ll notice that the crowds begin to thin. Jesus actually offends the people in his hometown of Nazareth (Mk 6:1-6), and when Jesus is arrested even his disciples “deserted him and fled” (Mk 14:50). Just about anybody with a few good tricks can draw an audience, but when it came to keeping a crowd, including the people he lived with for three years, you just might say that Jesus was a loser.

Loser: now there’s a title we all avoid. But when you read the Gospel of Mark and look at Jesus’ earthly ministry you come away with the clear impression that Jesus was, well, a loser. His early successes did not last. The people in his hometown ignored him. The religious leaders schemed against him. A close confidant betrayed him. At the time of his greatest need, his friends all deserted him. And finally, the Romans crucified him. Not exactly what you would call a howling success in the eyes of the world. But in the eyes of God, when it came to one thing – the *important part* – Jesus was a success; Jesus trusted God with all his heart and all his soul and all his might. That is why we gather in his name.

We recently not only survived but actually set a record for the quickest annual meeting in the history of St. Luke’s, which we accomplished *despite* holding an election for three positions on the Vestry. I was very pleased by both Debbie Fowler’s comments about the importance of running for Vestry and Father Jim’s gifts for everyone – those “Smile God” mugs are quite coveted – because I had raised a bit of a stink during a Vestry meeting about having an *actual* election since I could remember very good people leaving St. Luke’s after they weren’t elected to the Vestry. After all, we are a church, the incarnate body of Christ, and not a high school home room.

After the election results were announced last Sunday – I heard Jim Darnell telling several people after the meeting that the election was close – and Father Jim gave the consolation gifts, I heard him say, “there are no losers here at St. Luke’s.” And in a way, he’s right. But in another way I have to respectfully disagree with him, because we’re all losers here at St. Luke’s. Like

Christ, we all eventually lose the limelight we once had, fail to impress our hometown, and are disappointed by our closest friends. In the eyes of the world we are all losers, just as in the eyes of the world Jesus was a loser. But because Jesus trusted God even to his death, and was vindicated by God in the resurrection, we too are vindicated despite our losses and shortcomings when we trust in God with all our hearts and souls and might. As the psalmist wrote, “In you, O Lord, have I hoped; I shall never be put to shame.” *That’s* the true miracle. Amen.