

Well, who do we have here?

Mark 6:30-56

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist

Kanata Christian Reformed Church, Ottawa ON

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³⁰ The apostles returned to Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going, and knew them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns, and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ As he went ashore he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. ³⁵ And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a lonely place, and the hour is now late; ³⁶ send them away, to go into the country and villages round about and buy themselves something to eat." ³⁷ But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." And they said to him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" ³⁸ And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." And when they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." ³⁹ Then he commanded them all to sit down by companies upon the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. ⁴¹ And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴² And they all ate and were satisfied. ⁴³ And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴ And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men. ⁴⁵ Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶ And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. ⁴⁷ And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. ⁴⁸ And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them, ⁴⁹ but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost, and cried out; ⁵⁰ for they all saw him, and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." ⁵¹ And he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, ⁵² for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened. ⁵³ And when they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret, and moored to the shore. ⁵⁴ And when they got out of the boat, immediately the people recognized him, ⁵⁵ and ran about the whole neighborhood and began to bring sick people on their pallets to any place where they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or country, they laid the sick in the market places, and besought him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment; and as many as touched it were made well.

During this last week, while my wife and I were in Alexandria Virginia, we ventured over to Washington DC each day to take in the sites and to enjoy the restaurants.

One day, having eaten a restaurant quite close to the Capitol, we decided to walk up to the Capitol and see it up close, since neither of us had been close before. We assumed that we wouldn't be able to get very close. But, when we got there, the security simply glanced at us, and without a word, we passed right up to the Capitol steps. We gazed at this magnificent, beautiful building, that for so many inspires awe, and for some inspires hatred.

And while we stood looking, I said to Rachel: "Hey, that's Barack Obama." There he was, talking with two others. And then down the steps came John McCain. And while we stood looking further, Rachel said: "Oh my goodness, look: that's Hillary Clinton coming down the steps!" (Rachel added: "She looks

fantastic!”) Then, behind Mrs. Clinton was Tom Harkin, one of the senators from my home state of Iowa. Then, off to the side, we saw Teddy Kennedy talking to one of his aides. Then, John Kerry came down, followed by Joe Lieberman, who came over to us and asked us how we were doing?

To say the least, we were awed. There we were in the midst of America’s political elite.

The people were around Jesus knew that they were in the presence of someone who was very special. Perhaps not immediately, though. All of the Gospel stories seem to reflect a growing awareness on the part of those around Jesus that they were in the presence of someone really important. In addition to the people that we could name, Rachel and I also saw lots of men and women on Capitol Hill, who were also dressed very well and who must have also been “somebody” but we didn’t recognize them. They were, in all likelihood, members of the House of Representatives or new Senators who had not yet gained a prominence, at least a prominence like that of the others.

So, too, with Jesus: when he first appeared, people knew that someone was there, but as time went on, people were “wowed” by Jesus. There were miracles of healing happening with greater frequency. Then there was the multiplication of the loaves and the fish.

But, like many today, if you had asked them what it was about Jesus that was so incredible, you would probably have gotten different answers. In fact, what was really different about Jesus seems to have escaped almost all of them, including his closest followers.

For we know that some thought Jesus was great in the same way that people think the magician David Copperfield is great today: he was able to do things before people that made them gasp in awe. But, it was only magic, as David Copperfield himself asserts about his act. That’s what some thought Jesus was, a great magician, able to produce what seem like miracles, healings, and multiplication of bread. They stood in awe of him for his ability.

Others thought Jesus was great in the same way that the politicians on Capitol Hill are great: they are able to get people to do things that they would not otherwise do. I have heard far too many sermons that explain the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes as if it were the old story of “stone soup” on a large scale. In other words, the multiplication of loaves and fish by Jesus is explained as Jesus’ enormous power to get people to share what little they have with others so that all have enough. The “miracle”, if you can call it that, is really a political act: Jesus ensures that all have enough by having those who have some share it with all.

But....

But, those explanations of Jesus as awe-inspiring magician or great politician founder when we come to the story that follows: the calming of the winds on the sea. The facts are these: when Jesus multiplied the loaves and the fishes, there were thousands on the hillside who were without food. There was barely enough food found there to feed one family, much less a thousand, and yet, after Jesus took the bread, blessed God, and distributed the bread and fish to those gathered there, everyone had enough and the disciples of Jesus gathered enough bread to fill, as Mark tells us, twelve baskets full. Maybe he was just a magician; maybe he just got the people to share, or maybe... But the disciples were right there with him

the whole time. They witnessed the whole thing. They saw it up close, not from a distance. They should have known what he did, and thus who he was.

But then came evening, and the disciples who had gathered the bread, who had seen what had happened not just from a distance, but from right beside Jesus when he did what he did, got in their boat to go the other side of the lake. And as they got out into the lake, a great storm began.

Friends, if you have been on the water in a storm, or better yet, on the sea in a storm, you know how fearsome it can be. And the Sea of Galilee is no exception. You know that the water has a power that you cannot master but that can easily master you if it turns nasty. And it turned nasty for the disciples. And they were afraid.

And then, they saw Jesus, whom they had left on the land, coming toward them, walking on water. And now, hard pressed by the wind, in threat of perishing in the sea, and in the presence of ghosts, these poor fishermen were as the shepherds were at Christmas: “they were sore afraid”.

But, this Jesus, who had healed, who had multiplied bread and fishes, got into the boat, and then calmed the storm itself but his word.

The disciples looked at each other. They asked each other: “We knew this man was something, but who can do this? Calm the very expanse of sea itself?”

Mark sums the disciples’ reaction up best when he tells us that: “[The disciples] were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves” (Mk 6.51b-52a RSV).

Mark’s point is this: the disciples simply did not know who they had in the boat with them. Yes, healings were amazing; yes, the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish was amazing. And they should have been clues as to who Jesus really was. But, as I have witnessed even with preachers and priests today: they really don’t get it. They really don’t know who they have in the boat with them. If they did, believe me: the Church would not be rent asunder as it is now by petty issues that in the eternal scheme of things do not matter. Instead, they seek alternative explanations of Jesus – a magician, a great politician, an inspiring leader – and they don’t know in whose presence they are.

Let me put it as simply as I can: if the disciples had realized who Jesus was, that He was in fact the Lord of glory, the Lord of all time and space, they would not have feared, they would not have doubted, they would not have lived as they did. Their fears, their doubts, the petty issues of their lives would have faded into insignificance as they stood before the one who created time and space themselves.

My friends, last year I stood at the easternmost point of North America and looked out from that hill in Newfoundland across the waters of the ocean. I could only imagine the thousands of miles that that ocean stretched before it reached the next land, which was Ireland. There was nothing between me and Ireland, but that great sea, with its wild waves, with its teeming masses of fish and whales, with the puny ships that ply the waves, ships that look great even huge to us but which when seen from the perspective of the sea are as nothing.

And I knew then, as I now know, that over that great expanse of sea, there is one who is Lord even over that sea, the one who in the boat with his disciples, calmed the sea. One who is greater not only than the sea, but also the world of which the seas are but a part. I knew then as I watched the sun rise over the waters that He is not only greater than the world but also greater than our solar system, the galaxy, and even the universe itself, for He made them.

The disciples had no idea who they had in the boat with them. Do you have any idea who we have here with us in this boat that we call the church?

In just a moment, I will invite you to come forward to share with me at the altar as we eat of the bread of life and drink from the cup of salvation. I ask you to do so with reverence and awe, for do you know whose body we eat, whose blood we drink?

