

A sense of humor

by EARL F. PALMER

A middle of the night incident happened to the disciples of Jesus if we can believe what Matthew says. The disciples are probably baffled by the feeding of the 5,000 miracle and what happened afterward. Who wouldn't be? Then Jesus sends them out in the late evening to row their boat across one end of the Lake of Tiberius. Now these disciples are struggling against heavy seas in the middle of the night, maybe seasick, probably upset at their teacher for his instruction that they make this trip, definitely frightened, when, by surprise, Jesus comes to them walking on the water. What a scene!

But how do we interpret such a narrative? If I am a pastor, how do I preach it? Did this actually happen, or is it a story told by New Testament writers somehow designed to encourage the readers of the gospel narratives to trust in Jesus of Nazareth as Lord? In other words, is this Matthew account a sign given by Jesus or a sign given by the early church?

I think this is an event that happened, a sign given by Jesus himself and told to us by Matthew. My reasons are textual and theological, but I have a whimsical reason too.

If this scene is a sign given to us by the early church gospel writers, then it means that one of the most exciting parts of the New Testament gospels, the part that children instinctively love best of all, has become for us, and children too, a story written by early church novelists. They would have created adventures of Jesus for readers like us to stir up our faith in Jesus. This account and others like it may be written with devout motives but they are essentially condescending stories and therefore hard to preach, except to a carefully schooled audience. This "signs given by the church" guideline may leave us with only a short list of epigrams and sayings and carefully monitored narratives that will then be allowed for inclusion into the record of actual Jesus events.

Years later, after the New Testament was first written, a few "scholars" will meet together in Eugene, Oregon, at a "Jesus Seminar," and they will inform us as to which narratives and epigrams are on the historical list. This group of interpreters will have periodic elections among themselves to vote on what qualify as gospel texts. Jesus, the one we meet in this revised gospel, therefore, is never really humorous or whimsical since he is so totally focused on heavy ethical and revolutionary instructions. It means that the most interesting action parts of the

gospels become the "fictional" stories told by clever early church writers in their attempt to show those who would read the gospels what God's love would be like if it were practical and exciting for a human participant to experience and see. This interpretive rule treats the gospel writers as creators of story but not as earnest reporters of events.

I believe that Pascal saw it best, "A king knows how to speak of power, a rich man knows how to speak about wealth and God knows how to speak about God." Jesus Christ does not need the early church writers to make him relevant, or to show what his love is really like, or to invent the joyous humor that radiates from his character. Jesus can speak for himself. Jesus can do what he chooses to do. Jesus knows how to touch those who have leprosy. He watches four men lower a friend through the hole they made in the roof of a rich man's house at Capernaum. Jesus knows how to bless children. It is not an ancient church writer bravely trying to show us what love would be like if it were personal; it is Jesus himself giving to us signs, human and personal, of his character and of our worth.

Jesus knows how to rescue from embarrassment the bridegroom at a wedding when the wine has failed, and he does it quietly, yet with style. Jesus knows how to walk on the water; and he actually did it because his crew of trainees needed that concrete, hilarious, dangerous, unforgettable moment in the middle of the night on a famous lake. Peter needed to try to walk on the water too. The fact is that Jesus is exciting to be around and here is one more concrete instance that shows it to us.

Best of all, we discover how Jesus heals with good laughter. The disciples are made well by the humorous incident on the lake. Their gloom about unanswered questions and a confusing mandate to row their long boat onto a lake at night had made them upset and frightened too. Now they are well, and with a fun story for both Matthew and John to tell! An even better moment will come on the first day of the week after a Friday of terror when Jesus will surprise them again. On that day they will even laugh at death.

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