

WHAT COULD JESUS DO?

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Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief (Mark 6:4-6).

The older I get, the funnier the gospel is to me. Not many people read the Bible at all, and when they do they often miss the jokes, because they expect religion to be serious. But comedy consists in contradiction, and nothing contradicts everyday experience like the gospel, so we should expect the Good News to be funny — and it is.

Jesus is having a bad day. He comes to his hometown and he can't do much here, because everybody thinks they know him already. It's been said that an expert is someone who crosses a county line to give advice. It isn't that strangers know more, necessarily; it's just that we don't know them as people and so we're willing to see them as experts. The same sort of thing happens between teenagers and parents. Another adult can tell us things our mother said all along, but we listen to Mrs. Jones because she's cool, while Mom is just Mom.

Familiarity breeds contempt, as they say. People who knew you in diapers have a hard time taking you seriously as an adult. So here's Jesus, home for the weekend, a celebrity all over the country. But in Nazareth he's just the carpenter's kid, Mary's boy, Jim and Joe and Judas and Si's brother. Some people wonder how he knows all this stuff, but others take offense: Who does he think he is, putting on airs?

So, Mark says, Jesus can't do much here, except that he lays hands on a few sick people and heals them. Jesus on a bad day has powers the rest of us only dream of. All he can do is heal a few — as if that wasn't spectacular enough.

Jesus and his neighbors are amazed at each other. They're amazed at him because of what people say about the guy they grew up with. He's amazed at them because they still don't get it.

Does it strike you as odd that Jesus is amazed? Christians often talk about Jesus as though he knew everything and therefore nothing could surprise him. But that's not what the gospel says. Sometimes, often in fact, Jesus finds the rest of us baffling. "Have I been with you all this time and you still don't understand?" he asks. We can be downright exasperating.

Jesus can't do much in his hometown because no one expects him to be able to. And it strikes me that Jesus can't do much in the church sometimes, for the very same reason. Oddly enough, the congregation that gathers in his name often does not expect much from Jesus. We think we know what there is to know about him. His neighbors thought they knew him because they knew his family and his trade, and they played soccer with him. We think we know him because we've heard the stories in Sunday school, and sat through sermons, and said "the prayer that Jesus taught us" so many times that it's all too familiar.

We've domesticated Jesus — brought him under our roof, confined him to church, tamed him in our minds — until we think we know what he can and cannot do. We don't expect much from Jesus, and our unbelief limits what he is able to do.

Why do we do that? Maybe it feels safer. Who knows what Jesus might do, or want us to do, if we let him loose in our lives — if the Word of God really walked among us, or the Spirit of God blew wherever

it would? Congregations tame Jesus the way his hometown tried to tame him, and all he can do is heal a few of us and marvel at our unbelief.

What do you suppose Jesus could do if we were willing to believe?

One kind of church thinks the answer would be a multitude of miracles. People come to church and the preacher whips up a frenzy, and everybody is told to expect a miracle. Sure enough, miracles happen once in a while, just as they happen here from time to time.

But they do not always happen, because miracles are rare by definition. And in any case, miracles are not the point of the gospel. Jesus did miracles left and right in the New Testament, but the miracles never were the point. They were just signs. Signs show us where we're going, but they are not the destination.

A headline in the paper some time ago declared that mortality rates are down. "Really?" I thought. Mortality is down? The article went on to say that there are fewer deaths from heart attacks and cancer per 100,000 in the population, compared with a couple decades ago. That's a good thing. But the title was misleading. Mortality over all is not down. The mortality rate is still 100 percent. Everybody dies sooner or later.

That's true of all those people Jesus healed in the Bible too. If there were an appendix to the New Testament, the way movies in the end sometimes tell what became of the characters, the last earthly word on all of them would be the same. The blind, the deaf, the lame who were healed, they all died. The demoniacs whose demons were cast out, they died. Even Lazarus and Jairus's daughter, brought back spectacularly from the dead, came back only temporarily. In the end, they died too.

Everybody dies — which means that the healings and other miracles aren't the main point. The point of the gospel is that God is with us, no matter what. God does miracles once in a while to remind us that God is here. The point of the miracles is to trust God, because what we need more than gifts is the Giver, the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

You see that in the life of St. Paul. He had this mysterious thorn in his flesh, and ever since the generation that knew him passed away, people have wondered what that thorn was. There have been all sorts of speculations, but no one knows, and it's just as well. It doesn't matter what Paul's thorn was, because each of us has some thorn of our own, something we wish we could get rid of, but we can't.

Paul asked God to remove his thorn. Three times, he says, he prayed to God, but the thorn remained. What does that tell us?

For one thing, it means we should give up the silly idea that working for God, or showing up in church, is a kind of "Get Out of Jail Free" card to save us from all the hardships of life. In our consumer society, many people take a little religion the way they take a little Tylenol: just enough to make the pain go away, and then they stop. But Jesus doesn't promise that being faithful to God will relieve us from suffering in this world. On the contrary, Jesus invites us to take up a cross if we want to follow him.

The other thing Paul's persistent thorn tells us is that sometimes God is most conspicuously present precisely in the midst of our pain. "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this," Paul says, and God replied, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). Along the way, Paul learned that his own weakness was the occasion for God's strength to shine, and God's power in the midst of trials became an inspiration, not only to others, but to Paul himself.

Last week there was an obituary for a former *Post-Gazette* reporter named Monessa Tinsley-Crabb. She died of ALS, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. That's a terrible disease, which involves the gradual loss of strength throughout the body until almost nothing works any more. It's an awful way to die, but the striking thing about Ms. Tinsley-Crabb was the Christian faith she maintained throughout her illness. "It's not something I'd wish on anyone else," she wrote in her column, "but I know that it is God who decides these things, and he is not known for mistakes or unkindness. Even now I know that he can make my troubles someone else's blessing, perhaps via this column." Last May she wrote:

Since being diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, I have gained a stronger, more focused faith in God. Some seem surprised that I am not angry with God for this unhappy turn of events, but a stronger faith has been a positive consequence of this disease.*

What could Jesus do if we let him loose in our lives? He might heal us. I've known lots of people whose recovery from illness or addiction or loss or loneliness came only after they turned themselves over to God. Jesus might heal us, or perform some other miracle in our lives if we really believed in him. But then again, he might not. If he does not heal our bodies, or take away all our thorns here and now, it may be that our souls need to be healed even more. Sometimes, in the providence of God, a thorn in the flesh leads to healing in the soul. Salvation, after all, is a kind of healing, but healing that lasts forever.

What could Jesus do if we really believed in him — if we trusted him to direct our lives, rather than confining him to whatever we think we already know about him? It's hard to say, because Jesus is Lord and we are not. But whatever it is, it would be better than we can imagine, because "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

If that's true for us as individuals, what could Jesus do in the church, in a congregation that gave itself wholeheartedly to him, seeking his guidance and being willing to follow wherever he leads?

We don't know the details, but we can be sure it would be a great adventure. We would probably see a miracle now and then, but much more often we would see lives transformed. People would find purpose and meaning and hope where there was none before. We would see hearts moved with compassion, and more and more people stepping out of the small selfishness of everyday life and into the larger life of service.

And our horizons would grow. We would no longer imagine that God's love was shrink-wrapped around us and our own concerns, but we would hear Jesus say, "I have sheep that are not of this fold," and we would come to see every human being as another one of Jesus' sheep. Eventually our hearts would grow almost as big as Jesus' heart, and knowing him and loving him and looking after his people would be the point of life and the joy of life. Then, no matter what else happened, this life would be so rich and full that before we knew it we'd find ourselves in eternal life, giving thanks and praise to God for all good gifts.

None of knows what God has in store for us, because God is God and we are not. But what if we turned our lives over to God and let the Word of God, the living Spirit of Christ, transform us? Do we really think we could do better on our own? What if we gave our lives completely to God? What could Jesus do then?

* Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*, January 22, 2009.