

¹ After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ² A large crowd kept following him because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³ Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵ When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹ "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place, so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹ Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." ¹³ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. ¹⁶ When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷ got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸ The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰ But he said to them, "It's me; do not be afraid." ²¹ Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

John 6:1-21

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"On What Is Possible"

Rev. Amy Terhune

A pastor was making a scheduled home visit to one of the younger families in his congregation. When he arrived, the five-year-old boy answered the front door and told the minister his mother would be there shortly. To make some conversation, the minister asked the little guy what he would like to be when he grows up. The boy immediately answered, "I'd like to be possible." The minister was puzzled by that answer. "What do you mean by that?" he asked. "Well, you see," the boy replied, "just about every day my mom tells me I'm impossible! I'd like to be possible." [from Richard Pratt, "Partners In the Impossible", www.Sermons.com.]

How many of you deal with impossible in your life? Maybe in your personal life. Does life feel impossible when the bills are always bigger than what's coming in? Does life feel impossible when you consider relationship with family members? When fighting illness? When keeping up with projects around the house? Or maybe you look at the world around us, and see the impossible. Peace in the middle east? It'll never happen! A cure for cancer? Eradicating poverty? Heck, just getting along with people in our own community? Impossible.

They say that preachers preach to themselves. Today, that's true. The single biggest spiritual struggle in my life is cynicism. I make a deliberate choice every day to have hope, even when all evidence seems to contradict any cause for hope. I make that choice in faith that God is able.

But sometimes – sometimes it’s the hardest choice I make. I’m with that little boy: I want to be possible. I want to believe that impossible things are possible. Children have no difficulty believing in the impossible. I want to be childlike in that respect.

Today’s scripture lesson is about believing the impossible. It’s about relinquishing our drive to control, in order to let God move in ways we never dreamt possible. Some would tell me this is foolish, but when it comes to faith, I’m convinced that believing is seeing. It’s amazing what God does when we start looking for what God’s already doing.

In our lesson, Jesus has been teaching and healing all across the region, even on the sabbath day. He’s been going non-stop, facing constant criticism from the Pharisees and constant demands from the crowd. He heads across the sea, maybe hoping for a bit of breather, but the crowds figure it out and walk around the lake to meet him on the other side. Rather than being annoyed or put out by their persistence, Jesus puts his own needs on hold in order to deal with their needs. The text says that Jesus looked up. He sees them coming and is anxious to welcome them closer—not push them away. This is where the story of miracles always begins—in Jesus’ eyes. Jesus sees a multitude of people who are hungry. Jesus sees a man blind from birth. Jesus sees a man who is lame, another with leprosy and Jesus has compassion for them. Compassion means to "feel with" another. Jesus feels our pain—is aware of our hurt. He sees our need.

There’s a wonderful story told about a church situated in a rather rough neighborhood who decided that they need to reconnect with folks just beyond their doors. They started a food pantry, opened their doors to AA, began job training courses during the week. Another way they tried to connect was to open their fellowship hall on Tuesday and Thursday evenings so that the teenage boys in the area could come in off the street and play basketball.

The custodian in this church was a fellow named Ted. Now Ted was one of those kinds who was very possessive and particular about the building’s appearance, and so these teenage boys in the hall two nights a week presented a real challenge to him. They spilled pop and didn’t clean it up, the wastebasket in the men’s room would be overflowing with paper towels and potato chip bags by the time the evening was over. Occasionally Ted found cigarette butts or drugs. Sometimes there was rough-housing and tables or chairs or light bulbs got broken. The entryway was always muddy and the glass covered in fingerprints when they left. Sometimes, Ted would grumble about the mess to the pastor, and was always reminded that this was a mission and church buildings are meant to be used.

The church was set up in such a way that the fellowship hall flowed into the narthex and the narthex into the sanctuary. There were wooden doors that could be closed to separate the hall from the narthex, and a gorgeous pair of historic stained-glass doors that separated the narthex from the sanctuary. On basketball night, the wooden doors were closed, and the boys were content to play in the hall, but one really hot Tuesday night, the boys propped open all the doors in the hall to allow for air flow since it wasn’t air-conditioned. As you might expect, a ball got away from one of the kids just minutes before the end of game time, went bouncing through the open door into the narthex and pounded against the historic stained-glass doors to the sanctuary. The glass, of course, shattered into a thousand pieces, and the hall went silent. Every boy knew that this would surely mean the end of basketball nights at the church.

Both the pastor and Ted heard the crash and went running. Ted surveyed the damage and then turned his eyes on those boys. His voice thundered through the hall. “Sit down, boys!” He looked over their sweaty faces, eyes looking down out of guilt or exasperation, and he said, “those glass doors were more than a hundred years old. They’re precious and beautiful. It will cost a lot of money and take a specialist a lot of time to fix them.”

The pastor was about to cut in, but Ted continued. "But I want you boys to know that each and every one of you is far more precious, far more beautiful, and far more valuable than a pair of doors. A craftsman made those doors, but God made you. And his son gave his life to save yours. Now I know that some of you are as broken as that glass right now in your life. You've been pummeled and wounded by forces beyond your control, but don't forget that there's a specialist here who puts lives back together. His name is Jesus Christ, his services are absolutely free of charge to you, he knows your names, and he loves every single one of you. If you want to know more, you can talk to Pastor or to myself. In the meantime, all of us here are praying for you, we love you, and we'll see you on Thursday night for basketball. Goodnight boys." [original source of this story unknown.]

That night, Ted followed the example of Christ. He looked up. He put on Christ's eyes and saw a need greater than his own—a need for affirmation, love, acceptance, grace. You and I need to follow Christ's example as well. We need to look up. We need Christ's eyes. We need to see people and their needs. We can be compassionate, extending grace and acceptance.

Our story from scripture for today is about a young man who didn't have much. But what he did have, he offered to Christ. And thousands of hungry people were fed. When we give God something to work with, God acts. When we give God our best, God does the rest.

There are always people who focus on what can't be done or what can't happen. There are always people who are predicting disaster. When Lou Holtz led the University of Arkansas into the 1978 Orange Bowl, he was warned that fans might throw oranges at his team. "Could be worse," said Holtz. "We could be going to the Gator Bowl." I like Holtz' attitude.

I don't really know what Jesus thought or said or did as he broke those loaves and fish and shared them with the crowd, but I can guarantee this much: As Jesus looked up to heaven to give thanks, he did NOT think to himself, "Gee, I hope this works!" Jesus knew God better than that. He knew God was God of the possible.

The disciples of Jesus were focusing on their problems – not their possibilities. Maybe you've heard it said that the seven last words of the church are "We've never done it that way before". I don't think that's true. I mean, maybe for some people, some churches, but by and large, my experience has been that churches are willing to try new things if they understand the reasoning behind it.

No, the seven last words of the church are these: "We don't have enough to do that." It's much more difficult to counter such a notion or to coach a group past thinking that way. The scarcity mentality. We don't have enough—enough money, enough volunteers, enough time, enough space, enough ambition, enough energy, enough expertise. We don't have enough—it costs too much, it asks too much. It's impossible. We don't have enough. Not that I'm not advocating sheer idiocy, but there is a place for stepping out in faith. Look at what Jesus does: He takes what is given. He uses what is offered. He multiplies what there is. Enough comes after the thanks is offered, after the gifts are shared, after the work is begun. Enough is what follows our faith, not what sparks it.

The sad truth about this moment in scripture is that the crowds take from this moment the belief that Jesus can give them what they want. When they try to force him to be king, Jesus withdraws up the mountain. The crowds don't understand the reality of God's power. God does not extend grace because God is all powerful. God does not show compassion because it's God prerogative to do so. We humans always mix this up. Compassion IS God's power. God's power is rooted in God's grace. Grace, compassion, love – these are the things that make God God. These are the source of Jesus' power. And when we submit ourselves to divine grace, to compassion, to love itself, we too find enormous power to join in Jesus' work of building God's Kingdom.

As Jesus' disciples row across the stormy sea as our lessons closes this morning, Jesus comes to them. Commentators always point out that these are miracle stories. But the miracle isn't the power of God to control and manipulate the weather. The miracle is that Jesus comes to his people in need. He steps out in faith in ways we believe impossible. He walks across the water. And when his disciples see him, our lessons reports what Jesus says: "It's me; don't be afraid." But if you look at the original Greek, the words translated "it's me" are *egō eimi*, which are better translated: I Am. "I am. Don't be afraid." "Jesus reveals his true nature to his disciples in order to calm their fears, to ensure their safe passage, and to remind them that God has always been, is, and will always be their savior. Jesus' glory is not revealed for power, but for grace-filled pastoral care." [adapted from Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX*, L.E. Keck et al, eds. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press; 1995) pg. 597.]

And this is the good news of these lessons. God has compassion because God is compassion. God uses what's available. God calls us to follow Jesus in stepping out in faith, in order that grace and compassion and love may become the way of the world. That's impossible, you say? And we've come full circle. Friends, whatever else may be, have faith in God's ability to transform hearts, minds, lives, and systems. It's not impossible. It's what God does. Thanks be to God! Amen.