

The Rev. Laura Palmer

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The Invisible Who Make Miracles Happen

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to thee,
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer, AMEN.

Rarely does it go well when I'm on the side of the disciples because it usually means I'm about to learn something that makes me uncomfortable. Often it's a sharp reminder (as if I needed reminding), that my ways are not always like Jesus' ways.

Jesus had taken a boat to a deserted place after the beheading of his friend and mentor John the Baptist. Beheading, like lynching is synonymous evil. Understandably desperate to get away and be alone with his grief, Jesus tried to leave. But his compassion surpassed his own needs and Jesus healed and cured the crowds that had followed him.

That should have been enough, right? I'm there with the disciples who urged Jesus to send them away. But Jesus was never about making perfect or logical sense. He told the disciples to feed them.

Can you imagine what the disciples thought? Jesus would no doubt come to his senses when he realized there were only five loaves of bread and two fish. But there wouldn't have been a miracle if he did.

The story of the "Feeding the Five Thousand" is in all four gospels and repeated twice in two of them. It's a story we've heard at least 4 thousand times. Theologically, it offers a choice. This can be a story about scarcity and abundance. Or it can be a straight-up miracle. In the end, we have utterly no idea of what actually happened. We have to take it into ourselves and see where it leads.

Fresh insight for me came from a Roman Catholic scholar and theologian, Megan McKenna, who points to the significance of the last line, which in Matthew's version reads: "And those who ate were about five thousand men; besides women and children."¹

¹ 1 McKenna, Megan, Dr., Not Counting Women and Children, Orbis Books, January 1, 1994

Oh. Full Stop. This text could be called “Feeding the Five Thousand Men.” Women were not counted and had no legal rights in the 1st Century. None. It's estimated that women usually had 5-6 children but as citizens with rights, they were invisible.

McKenna points out that while men might set out into the wilderness without food, a woman with her children would not. Not then and not now. McKenna says, “If that’s true, then it was exactly the ones who didn’t count that made the miracle happen.”²

Revelatory, right? The ones who didn’t count, made the miracle. What does it tell you about The kingdom of God? Think of those who don’t count who’ve made miracles for you that were transformative in your life.

It took me half a century to realize that one of the most important spiritual teachers in my life, is my brother, Mark. As someone developmentally disabled with “special needs” he’s not counted the same way as everyone else if he’s counted at all. The miracle is my realization that it is I who have special need of him as I continually learn his lessons of love, non-judgment, and kindness over and over again.

Destined to be invisible, was a dirt-poor black kid from the Jim Crow South. But the Holy Spirit was moving in him early on when he began preaching to his chickens on his family’s farm. Destined never to ever count, Congressman John Lewis was eulogized when he died by three Presidents in Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church—the church the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called home.

King was an inspiration to Lewis who heard him on the radio shortly after 14-yearold Emmitt Till was lynched, mutilated, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River which his racist killers were sure would seal his invisibility.

“He was my George Floyd...” Lewis wrote decades later and described how he was galvanized by King’s words.

We are all complicit when we tolerate injustice and that it is not enough to say it will get better by and by. Each of us has a moral obligation to stand up, speak up

² 2 Ibid.

and speak out. When you see something that is not right, you must say something.³

You must do something. And for the next sixty-five years, that's exactly what John Lewis did. He stood up and stirred up what he called "good trouble, necessary trouble." He was beaten so badly on the head while demonstrating for voting rights he tasted his own blood and could have died but didn't. Months later in 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965.

Voting rights. Something John Lewis was willing to die for and something fundamental to our democracy. Voting rights might not have come into this sermon 69 years later had not the former President and Republican nominee said in a speech in West Palm Beach on Friday:

Christians, get out and vote, just this time. You won't have to do it anymore. Four more years, you know what, it will be fixed, it will be fine, you won't have to vote anymore, my beautiful Christians.⁴

At last count, 100,000 people, who might have remained invisible politically registered to vote this week, many of them young.

Congressman John Lewis would have been pleased. He wrote a letter to be read after his death which miraculously fed the parched souls of those who heard it then and those who recall it now, just as surely as the loaves and fishes of those on the hills of Galilee two thousand years ago:

Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe...When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers

³ Lewis, Congressman John Lewis, "Together You Can Redeem the Soul of our Nation," New York Times, July 30th, 2020

⁴ 4 Gold, Michael, "Trump Tells Christians You Won't Have to Vote Anymore," New York Times, July 27th, 2024

and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.⁵

That wind has blown mightily throughout our nation this week. We have lived with the dread of what can happen when “We make America Hate Again.”

I’m not only inspired, but humbled, brought to my knees humbled, when the invisible, the forgotten, the voiceless, the marginalized, stand up and make a miracle happen. As a young child, kids in her neighborhood were not permitted to play with Kamala Harris because she was black. Her father was Jamaican and after her parents divorced, she was raised by her South Indian mother with a thick accent and brown skin who was invisible and always counted out—despite her doctorate and the work she did as a breast cancer researcher. As Harris said her 2020 Presidential bid:

... people would overlook her, or not take her seriously, or because of her accent, assume things about her intelligence...Every time my mother proved them wrong... The fact that my mother never asked anyone permission to tell her what was possible, is why — within one generation -- I stand here as a serious candidate for president of the United States.⁶

This is the week invisible people stood up. Registered to vote. Donated millions and millions of dollars because they felt inspired and galvanized to act by that wind that blew through all our lives.

When I see miracles made by those left out and uncounted, by those deemed forgotten and invisible, I know I’m in the presence of Jesus, the one walking across the turbulent waters saying, “It is I: do not be afraid.” AMEN.

⁵ Lewis, Congressman John Lewis, “Together You Can Redeem the Soul of our Nation,” New York Times, July 30th, 2020

⁶ Harris, Kamala, The Today Show, NBC News, July 21, 2024