

March 2009

Dear Friends,

I have recently been reading through the Gospels (again), enjoying the personality of Jesus. It's not only his teaching that stands out; there is a *personality* that shines through. Jesus is such a compassionate, true, insightful, playful, *disruptive* man.

For example, I love the story in John of the wedding at Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine. John finishes his account of that event with this statement:

He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him (2:11).

Pause for a moment. *What* exactly did Jesus reveal about himself, that the disciples put their faith in? Yes, it was miraculous. But the miracle has very specific qualities about it. First, I love how Jesus says to his mother, "Don't ask me to do this; I hadn't planned on revealing myself at this time." But she, like a classic Jewish mother, simply says to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you," knowing that Jesus will do it after all. What is so beautiful is that Jesus is approachable, compassionate, understanding. He is not a rigid God, who refuses to hear the cries of his people. He is not a God who cannot make room for our requests. Or what good would prayer be?

Next, notice how Jesus handles the awkward moment. The party is out of wine. He provides one hundred twenty to one hundred eighty *gallons* of refreshment, and top shelf wine at that. What does this say about his personality? Do you see the generosity, the abundance, his smile upon the joy of man? By providing a staggering amount of great vino, Jesus is saying, "Let the party continue! Enjoy!" What a remarkable person. And yes, powerful. *This* is what the disciples put their faith in.

Towards the end of John comes another of my favorite stories. It is after the resurrection. Jesus has appeared to his disciples twice, then disappeared again. They don't really know what to do, so the guys go fishing. But they have a bad night, and haven't a sardine to show for their efforts. Jesus appears on the shore; they don't yet know it's him. He says, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" (21:5). It cracks me up. He doesn't start with a miracle; he doesn't announce who he is. He asks them a question knowing perfectly well they haven't caught any fish. Then he tells them to throw their nets on the other side – and again we see the generosity, the abundance, but also here something that can only be described as playful.

It's the same playfulness we find in the story in Luke about the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus sneaks up on some dejected followers, hiding his identity. He walks along with them, egging them on, "No, I haven't heard. What's been happening in Jerusalem? Tell me." This is the resurrected Christ, by the way. Here are two people he loves, in deep distress because they don't know he's resurrected. Don't you think he'd just come out with the good news right off? What's with the disguise? It can only be described as playfulness; anything else is bizarre.

Anyhow, yesterday morning I was reading a few chapters earlier in Luke, where Jesus has come to the garden of Gethsemane. He knows what's about to unfold. He says to his disciples,

Pray that you will not fall into temptation (22:40).

Ummm – what? This seems a rather strange moment to be warning his dear friends about temptation. I mean, what – a bunch of girls are about to show up looking for company? There’s a case of liquor just around the corner and the boys are going to get hammered? They are alone, in an olive grove, in the dead of night. What a strange time to be warning his disciples about temptation.

Or is it?

What temptation does Jesus know comes in a time like this?

Well – what are you tempted to fall to when times turn dark, when crisis hits, when God seems to have failed to come through? Isn’t the temptation to fall into despair? Or distress? To start thinking terrible thoughts? To give way to fear, and doubt, and unbelief? Have you ever even put those things in the category of *temptation*? As in, Do not yield to this *sin*?

It has actually been a rough couple months for us. I was stressed out when I read this verse, and Jesus knew I was about to receive a few more reasons to wig out. I was giving way to what I felt was perfectly justifiable distress. God caught my attention with the seeming randomness of the verse, which got me to wondering what in the world it was doing there, which led me to thinking what the temptation might be. Then I realized I was on the brink of it myself. Distress. Inner turmoil. Fear. Up until this moment I hadn’t even thought of it as temptation, as sin.

But now I see it for what it is: Unbelief. I see the damage that my unbelief does – to my own heart, my perspective, to my relationship with God. *Do not give way to this*, Jesus says. Watch, and pray. Guard yourself against this turn.

So I must come back to his goodness. To the personality of the man I see in these stories, and his power. He is incredibly kind, and faithful; he is generous and playful; and yes, he is powerful. This is where my faith must lie. This is his “glory,” and like the disciples this is what I must put my faith in. It feels like reeling my heart in from wandering to darker thoughts; at times it feels like stepping back from the edge of a cliff. Watch and pray; do not yield to thinking what is not true about God. Catch yourselves.

I thought this might be helpful to you as well.

Thank you, dear friends, for your prayers and financial support. For your friendship.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'John' written in a cursive, flowing style.

John