

Getting Real Can Be Risky

January 30, 2011

Most people probably realize that the line between fantasy and reality is a fine one. Following the recent tragic Tucson, Arizona shootings, the political commentators were engaging in such knifing rhetoric that I had to stop and ask myself is this real or is it fantasy? Sometimes, the answer to that question is, “Your guess is as good as mine.” In the film, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* the line between the human actors and the cartoon characters was absolutely seamless.

When many look at Jesus Christ, they ask is he real? Or are the stories about him in the Bible just that: nice stories? Do we have a flesh-and blood Savior, or a lovely ethical leader who simply tells us to be nice and never to kick dogs?

If you're like me, you want a real Jesus, an authentic Jesus, a flesh-and blood Jesus to believe in. But in this desire to have a Jesus who gets real there is danger. There is also challenge. If you seriously want today to get real about your faith, then stick around. To begin getting real about our faith, there are a few things we need to understand about Jesus. They come out here in this wonderful miracle of the transformation of water into wine.

JESUS IS WILLING TO BE A PART OF OUR REALITY

He is much more than a “pie-in-the-sky” Savior or teacher. Look at what happens here in this miracle. Jesus has been invited to a wedding reception...much as many of us go to wedding receptions. He is enjoying himself – and then his mother begins to beseech him to help out their friends who are in danger of running out of wine. “You’ve got to help” his mother says. Now Jesus tries to beg off. But his compassion for his friends gets the better of him – and Jesus decides to get real...by risking a revelation about himself. He knows this miracle may call attention to him. But he wants to begin becoming part of the people’s reality. He wants to be part of people’s reality; to be an integral part of their lives.

He wants to be part of your life too, in the daily struggle: paying bills, meeting mortgage payments, raising children, getting along with others, etc. You see, the point of this miracle is not that, if you believe, tomorrow your water will always be converted to wine and that your troubles will be over. The point is that WHEN PUSH COMES TO SHOVE IN LIFE, AND IT ALWAYS DOES, Jesus will not cop out or fail to be real. He will be there for you in your reality. The challenge is letting him do that for your life.

I ran across the story of a man who found a strange object in the jungle. Part of it was bowl-shaped and was good for scooping up drinking water – but eventually that part rotted away. So, he used the vertical stick-shaped part of it to guide some beans down a pole – but that rotted away too. Finally, he used the remaining parts to fuel a fire one night to keep himself warm. He congratulated himself on getting so many uses out of this, this, well, thing. The next day, he ran into a young woman in the jungle who had one of the same objects. “Bet you cannot do as many things with that as I did,” he boasted. The girl looked at him oddly for a moment and then began to pluck out a haunting melody from...the little African harp.

The person who told this story concluded by saying, “Will you let the Creator play his music on you?” Otherwise, we tend to muddle through life, plucking ideas from here and there about how to live, even as that man used up the parts of that instrument – but life has no cohesiveness or

wholeness to it. JESUS brings that wholeness – if you want him to be part of your reality. He decides to enter into the real world here, to reveal himself that others may come to know him.

He's willing to be part of your reality.

JESUS ALSO WILL CHALLENGE YOUR REALITY

Jesus is always willing to challenge the status quo as someone who is saying, "Can things be better?" When he is part of your life, you will find yourself saying the same thing. Here is Jesus seeking to improve the awkward situation in which his friends find themselves: by challenging, through a miracle, that things must always be the same as they are.

Imagine yourself as one of those at the wedding feast. Suddenly, the better wine is brought in, when the custom is to serve the better wine first and then, after everyone is a little "tipsy," bring out the cheaper vintages. You indeed might wonder, "What is going on here?"

The challenge to the reality comes out ringingly: Jesus is going to do the best he can with what he has right then and there...ordinary water transformed into something better. That's a challenge to reality friends! DO WE challenge our reality enough to do what needs to be done using what we have right now? Sometimes, I wonder.

Jesus is willing to work with us in our lives even as we live our lives right now. And it makes no difference how educated you are; how poor or wealthy you are; how skilled or unskilled you are. "Now draw out some water and take it to the banquet." You see friend, we often spend time in life running from reality and certainly not letting Christ into it. We fail to see his transforming power. We refuse to access it, because to do so is risky.

Jack London, author of *The Call of the Wild*, put it well when he said, "I would rather be ashes than dust. I would rather have my spark burn out in a brilliant blaze than be stifled by dry rot. I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom and molecule of me aglow, than a sleepy and perseverant planet. The proper function of humanity is to live not to exist."

Living moves from existence to real living when Jesus is allowed to challenge our reality even as he is a part of it. "What can I do right now for Jesus Christ? How can things be better? What can my church and I do? What ordinary things can I do in an ordinary place with the power of Christ in my life?" are all risky questions...but to get real is to risk.

JESUS WILL ALSO EXPAND YOUR REALITY

Jesus has challenged people's reality and now has expanded it. He works with the ordinary supply of water, challenges that reality, and then expands it. And notice how quietly, in a sense, this challenge takes place. Look at the account of the miracle carefully. There is no dramatic appearance of brand-new wine barrels; no sudden manifestation of bursting wineskins.

Instead, Jesus quietly transforms something ordinary into something extraordinary – and in so doing, reveals himself and begins expanding people's reality. And that is often how the real Jesus, anchored in the reality of your life, works miracles. It is how the shepherd works, the one who leads us beside still waters and comforts, or restores our souls: quietly but no less miraculously.

Not only must our current reality be challenged by Jesus in our lives, it also must be expanded. Otherwise, we find ourselves as individuals and as churches, marking spiritual time. Can you imagine the great pioneers of, say, medicine, thinking to themselves, "We'll work on medical

progress only with what we have?" No! Indeed medicine or law or religion does work with what it has – challenging reality – but then moves on to seek to expand that reality with vision. THAT'S what people had to begin to comprehend: do what you can with what you have AND ALSO look ahead, envision, dream.

But one has to have Jesus Christ in one's reality first to challenge reality and then expand it. And sometimes the expansion is right in front of you. The great French writer, Marcel Proust, once said, "The real voyage of discovery consists Not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes." We need to see with new eyes the miracles Jesus Christ can do by expanding our reality here at the beginning of a new decade...miracles of giving, and in serving, in teaching, in mission. Challenge the reality we live with – but also expand that reality by saying, "Yes, it is possible to do more, give more, minister more."

A hard reality hit Texas several years ago. A horrible drought strangled the land. The then Gov. of Texas asked his minister to lead a prayer service for rain. He agreed. Everyone from miles around jammed into the church one evening. The minister stood up looked out over the congregation and said, "Let's all go home. There is no sense in praying tonight. NO ONE BROUGHT AN UMBRELLA."

Do you want a Savior who is real? The most real One you can know is Jesus Christ. But it is risky. He will challenge you right now, this minute, in the middle of the life you lead. And he will expand your reality beyond your wildest expectations.

Take that risk. Let Jesus rule and reign in your life. And, oh, don't forget your umbrella.

The Rev. Wesley Smith
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