

Jester and Tester

John 6:1-14

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He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. (John 6:6)

I don't know exactly how to say this without appearing a bit irreverent, but have you ever noticed that Jesus seems to be something of a sly tease in the Bible? It's Easter Sunday morning. Mary Magdalene has been crying her eyes out there at the empty tomb for a couple of hours, and Jesus appears to her, but he seems to be in disguise. She mistakes him for the gardener.¹ He's wearing different clothes, and this guy she knew so well before the previous Friday is not even recognizable. Now why does Jesus do this? Why does he seem to play with Mary and her fragile emotional state?

It's Easter Sunday evening. Two forlorn followers of Jesus walk a lonely road away from Jerusalem. They've completely given up on this entire kingdom of God enterprise when this guy walks up and asks them what's wrong. We know it's Jesus, but these two haven't a clue. The two sad guys ask Jesus if he's the only stranger in four counties who hasn't heard the things that have transpired recently. Jesus, incognito, coyly answers, "What things?"² Now what's up with that? Why not help these two grieving guys feel better quicker?

The disciples are crossing a stormy sea. The boat is on the verge of going down, and all twelve guys are bailing like crazy, but Jesus is snoozing on a soft little pillow in the stern.³ Comfy, Jesus? He makes things right in the end, but why does he let these disciples squirm like fish on a hook?

Part of our lesson involves Jesus walking on water. In Mark's version of this same story, Jesus comes striding across the sea, but then here comes this little detail: "He intended to pass them by."⁴ Just out for a little stroll, I guess. "Hey guys, please notice me in all my buoyancy, but I've got to be moving on. Ta-ta for now."

These are not isolated passages in the scriptures, but a running theme—Jesus as trickster, joker, something of a theological tease. And so today's story should not really surprise me. Jesus sees a large crowd coming his way. His popularity is on the rise. It's Passover and the area is full of faithful pilgrims, so Jesus and the disciples retreat to a mountain for a bit of privacy. But the throngs just keep on coming. They all take the blue-blazed side trail and follow Jesus up the hill. I should know Jesus well enough by now to sense the twinkle in his eye, to look between the lines of scripture, the words themselves, and try to set this scene in all its sensory lushness—the grass, the crowd; the wind, water, and weather; even Jesus' emotions. The hymn "Break Now the Bread of Life" is wonderfully inviting: "Beyond the sacred page, I seek you Lord."⁵ Beyond it. I should know this is coming. I should know that Jesus has a trick up his sleeve to make some point. But it does take me by surprise. Again!

The disciples are nervous in this scene. They should be. Think about your last dinner party and how much effort you put in to entertain a single table of *invited* guests. Now imagine 5,000 uninvited souls knocking on your door for some supper. It's like the whole town of Walhalla (and a couple of thousand more) hearing about

a picnic in your backyard. You can only stretch hotdogs so far.

But Jesus sits there as calm as a cucumber. And he says to Philip, “Gee. Gee whillikers.” And perhaps there’s a pause here for dramatic effect. “I wonder how we’re gonna’ feed all these people?” That line alone, if I’d been there, may have left me wondering about Jesus and his sanity. But we are privy to more. We are privy to the mind of Jesus, editorial information that trusting, innocent Philip did not have. And this is what was going on in Jesus’ mind: he said this to test Philip because he himself knew what he was going to do. Now perhaps we should not skip over this line too quickly. This is no anomaly with Jesus. This seems to be a character trait—the man’s a jester, a tease, a tester. This is not just my opinion. There are far too many biblical examples to argue with the facts.

What intrigues me is the obvious follow-up question—*Why?* Why does Jesus behave this way so consistently? Why this bait and switch style of theological teaching? And why does he do it still—with individuals like you and me? With entire congregations maybe?

Here’s a bit of truth that all serious students of the Bible will need to get used to at some point: Jesus is not going to make it all obvious for us. He’s going to tease and nudge and drop small pieces of bread along the path for us to pick up one at a time. Why? Because this is what good teachers do. Jesus refuses to serve up a soufflé of universal principles that will magically fix all of life’s problems. Jesus rarely provides instant solutions. This is hard for us to get used to in a world of instant everything. “My life was a mess. I was on my seventh marriage. I’d maxed out seventeen credit cards. I was addicted to Snickers Bars. And then I found Jesus and everything was instantly okay.” Instantly? Now come on.

You can call it testing if you want. But I prefer to call it teaching. And I prefer to call the result discipleship—where we follow in trust, where we mimic the man, where we slowly over time are transformed, converted bit by bit into something the Bible calls the very Body of Christ.

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And so a little boy comes forward with just a meager amount of food. But here’s the thing: *it’s all he has*. In some ways he reminds me of the old woman at the temple treasury who put in “all she had.”⁶ Like the woman, the little boy does not hold back. Now don’t get bogged down in how it all happens. The point is that Jesus does the rest. Jesus takes even what appears to be a meager offering presented in hope and trust and transforms our offerings for the sake of the whole. The story says that “Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them” to all in the crowd. I hope you recognize those very familiar words. They are almost the Words of Institution, the words we hear in conjunction with each Lord’s Supper. The Greek word for “give thanks” at this mountainside picnic thrown by Jesus is *eucharistein*—a word that gave birth to one of the names for this holy meal: Eucharist. Jesus can do lots even with a little. But he needs to know if our hearts are in it. Perhaps he even tests our hearts as he once did with his disciples of old.

There is a marvelous line from the Book of Ephesians where Paul prays that God the Father “may grant that you may be strengthened *in your inner being*, with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (3:16-17). Paul is concerned here about the inner being of the Christian.

It’s surely no secret that we are obsessed with the external being in the American

culture. We value beauty and washboard abs and wealth and first place and so many external things. It's easy to spend two hours waxing the car while complaining there's no time for prayer. I've done this. We all have. Why do we spend so much time on external stuff to the neglect of our inner lives? Because if truth were told, there's a lot of darkness we haul around internally, stuff we hide from friends, spouse, and even try to hide from God. It's easier, we think, to stay busy, stay distracted, watch a lot of TV, and try to keep the internal darkness at bay.

But one great truth of Christianity is that our external problems have internal solutions, not the other way around. Christ wants to probe places where I prefer to keep him at a distance. "May you be strengthened in your inner being," says Paul. If we really want to change, we do so from the inside out, not the other way around. Maybe this explains the teaching style of Jesus with his disciples. Knowing that all of us would be so secretive about our inner lives, the private place we hide so well, Christ has to surprise us with grace, even sneak up on us when we're not looking, when our artfully protected guards are down.

Notes

1 John 20:15.

2 Luke 24:19.

3 Mark 4:38.

4 Mark 6:48.

5 "Break Now the Bread of Life"

6 Luke 21:4.