

“God’s Powerful Love”
Part 3 of Sermon Series: *No Longer Strangers*

a sermon based on

Ephesians 3:14-21 & John 6:1-21

and delivered on

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at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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With well-known people sometimes you get a little “extra” with their stories. I don’t mean “the rest of the story” as Paul Harvey would have said. {aside: Those of you younger than me will have to google “Paul Harvey” later} The point is that sometimes stories get embellished as time goes on, and that may be the case with the story I’m about to share. I just want to be honest and put it out there.

So this is a story about Ignace Paderewski. I have no idea if I pronounced that right, but it doesn’t matter because you probably don’t know who he is either. But Ignace Paderewski (or however you say it) was a famous concert pianist and one time prime minister of Poland.

As the story goes, a mother wanting to encourage her young son in pursuing piano took him to one of Paderewski’s concerts. They even had front row tickets. When they arrived, there on the stage was this grand Steinway piano... and the ambiance... You know what it’s like in a theater or concert hall as people assemble for the performance - the rustle and shuffle as people take their seat, the low murmurs of anticipation in their conversations. This is all going on when the house lights begin to dim at 8:00. It’s at this moment that the mother turns to smile at her son, when she notices that he’s not in his seat. Can you imagine the panic?

Before she can even react the sound of the piano comes from the stage: 🎵 {do a “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” tune} That’s right! She looks up. There on the stage of this grand concert hall, where people have paid good money to hear the virtuoso – there sits her son pecking out “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” She was horrified. I’m sure that she had hoped to see her son on that stage at some time. That was the point of bringing him. But he didn’t have the skills to be there now. Would people laugh? Would they shout for him to get off the stage? Either way – his heart would be broken and he might just abandon the piano all together. Such was her fear.

And then Paderewski appeared from the side of the stage. He walked to where the boy sat on Paderewski’s bench. He whispered, “Don’t stop playing,” as he took his seat next to the boy, stretched his arms around him to either side and began to add a running *obligato* (whatever that is) as the boy pecked out “Twinkle, Twinkle” and the crowd was mesmerized.¹

That boy went up there because he didn’t know better. Those who did stayed in their seats. And that’s where we are. It’s true as the church, quite often we have grown accustomed to sitting on our hands, even when we sing “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus” unless of course an asterisk in the bulletin gives us permission to stand. The danger is that we become the “Frozen Chosen”.

The thing that freezes us quite frankly is fear – fear of our own ineptitude – fear of taking a risk because I’m not the best... I can’t give like a Rockefeller because I’m not rich. I can’t lead a prayer in worship, because I’m not the best public speaker. I can’t stand up to preach because I’m not the best preacher. Of course if being the best preacher was a requirement – I wouldn’t be standing here. I know so many better preachers.

The devil uses our own sense of inadequacy against us when we don’t feel able to be “the best” or a star. If your singing isn’t good enough to get votes on American Idol – don’t even bother singing. Certainly, don’t sing out in church where others will hear you. It doesn’t matter that at least four of the Psalms tell us to make a “joyful noise unto the Lord”. You’re not good enough. Don’t even try.

¹ Larson, Craig Brian, ed. *Illustrations for Preaching & Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993)221.

I haven't had the chance to do the math here, yet. It would probably be about the same, here. But several years ago in a congregation that was struggling financially, I did do the math. What I discovered was that if each giving unit – that's those who gave to the church – if only those families gave an extra \$5 per week that the congregation would be looking for ways to spend the extra money in ministry. When you included the entire membership rolls it would have only been \$2. Unfortunately, not many people took up the challenge. How is my \$5 going to make a difference? How is my \$1 going to make a difference? It's too hard for me...
If I had more money first...
If I had more talent... first.
If I had more confidence, first, then I could dare.
God can't really use my little bit...

You know, I did mention a challenge at the Church Council a couple weeks ago. I told them that at some point I would be challenging all of us to double attendance in five years. Sounds hard doesn't it. But what does it really take? Each one of you inviting one person into fellowship so that your friend can get to know Jesus Christ or know him better. And you have five years to do it.

This isn't something that's new. The church in Ephesus – those normal folks gathered for worship and fellowship – didn't feel up to the task that Paul laid before them. But what does he say in his benediction (one of my favorites to give)? “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” (Eph. 3:20) But that comes into fruition as members of the church as those who are a part and parcel of the body of Christ.

As I was thinking about it for my message, today, I could not think of one miracle after the story of Creation in which God does not require someone to be near. Even Jesus, every one of his miracles people are next to him when they experience healing – except maybe for the centurion's servant – but even then, the centurion came to him and asked him to give the command. The woman who reached out to touch the tassel on his prayer shawl, the crowds that pushed in on him, the blind men whose eyes he touched, the deaf, the lame, the lepers, even the woman healed of her adultery – they were healed because they were right there with him.

Maybe that's where our fear to act on our faith comes from. We're good at talking about God. We're good at talking about Jesus. But are we talking to him? Are we walking with him? Because it is in those encounters that we can expect to experience miracles. Jesus needs us to be ready. He really does. If that boy hadn't come forward with his lowly five barley loaves (we're talking muffin size here) and his two little fish, what would Jesus have had to bless and multiply?

When we hold back, we're not just depriving ourselves of a blessing or miracle, we're hindering the kingdom. But Jesus' promise for us – is the same promise that Paul passed on to the church in Ephesus, that when we walk with him and talk with him despite any reservations about our own capacity to do anything, he can and will do abundantly more than we can ask – (and this is the part I really love) he can and will do abundantly more than we can even imagine.

When we step out in faith – (even if you can't pluck out “Twinkle, Twinkle”) – when we come into his presence intending to see him – like that boy who came expecting to see Paderewski – that is when God puts his arms around us in gentle embrace and reveals the power of Jesus' grace in our lives. AMEN.