REASON TO MARVEL

Pilgrim Church, Duluth November 12, 1978 Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

Mark 6:6. Matthew 8:10. "And he marvelled....."

One of the things about Jesus that shows he was human is the fact that he could be surprised. Sometimes he ran into the unexpected in other people. When that happened, the gospels tell us, "He marvelled"; he broke out in exclamations of surprise.

These surprises appear to have taken two basic forms. First was his surprise that people could be so indifferent, so faithless, so lacking in understanding. This kind of surprise came to him in his home town of Nazareth. When he went back there he must have felt that something good would come out of his visit. He had grown up with these people. He had received the foundations of his faith among them. He loved them. He thought he knew them. But when he went home to Nazareth he met at best with indifference, at worst with hostility. It was a congregation, perhaps, like that which John Wesley found in Dundee, Scotland. "I admire this people!" Wesley wrote in his diary, "So decent! So serious! And so perfectly unconcerned!"

The gospel record reports with simple frankness on the impact Jesus made on the home town folks:

He could do no mighty work there.....

Perhaps that surprises us. My guess is that Oral Roberts or Norman Vincent Peale might have met with more success. But not Jesus. He was surprised, too, not so much at his lack of personal triumph as by the spiritual emptiness in his own neighbors. Writes Mark: "And he marvelled because of their unbelief."

But I said that Jesus' surprise took two forms. The second form occurred when he ran into people who did have faith and who did respond to his teaching. No doubt it was a surprise when members of the religious establishment came to him, people such as the ruler of the synagogue who besought Jesus in behalf of his sick daughter, or the leading Pharisee, Nicodemus, who sensed something extraordinary in this man from Nazareth. Jesus had learned not to expect much from religious officialdom. By and large they lined up against him.

He was surprised, too, when he encountered a powerful faith in a foreigner. He did not despise foreigners because of their nationality. But they did not appear at first within the scope of his ministry. He was called, he said, "to the house of Israel." It was a surprise then when the Canaanite woman approached him with such complete trust. It was a surprise when a Roman centurion came to a Rabbi in behalf of his servant. One expected to find many qualities in such a man: arrogance, ruthlessness, a haughty and sometimes cruel disregard for the native inhabitants and their religious customs. That such a man should show such tender concern for a mere servant was a marvel. That he should call Jesus, "Lord" and profess himself unworthy to have Jesus enter his house was even more astonishing. Perhaps his understanding of prayer was shaped too much by his military code. But there was no doubting his sincerity, his compassion or his complete trust in Jesus.

Again the gospel record tells us that Jesus marveled. "Truly I say to you," he exclaimed, "not even in Israel have I found such faith."

Such men as this Roman centurion did something for Jesus that had far-reaching consequences for the future of his movement. They stretched Jesus' horizon of appreciation. They elicited from him a new depth of respect for people outside the original circle of his ministry. Perhaps it is not too much to say that the surprise brought to Jesus by people like the Roman centurion made possible the world-wide outreach of the church.

Well, perhaps you too have encountered people who enlarged your horizon of appreciation. You have found in some person quite different from yourself qualities of commitment that aroused in you the surprise of a deeper respect.

I once served a church that had in it two centurions, two retired colonels. One was a West-Pointer, the other had served in the Air Force. Both were very active in the church and held responsible positions there. At first I was rather apprehensive about working closely with such men. My whole upbringing and outlook had been rather anti-military. I found, however, that these men brought to their churchmanship qualities that obviously were nurtured in their military background. They always got to places on time; they never failed to follow through on any task. Behind these outward habits of regularity and efficiency there were more personal qualities. They were scrupulous in their concern for what was fitting and what was honorable. They were loyal not only to the institution, but in personal relationships.

In other respects these men were quite different, and they were only barely acquainted with each other. But in the ways I have mentioned they held much in common. As I say, I could not doubt that these valuable qualities were derived in part from their military background. Thus my horizon of appreciation was stretched. I can think of not two men I would rather have in any church than those two colonels.

One of those colonels grew up as a Catholic in the same parish to which some of my ancestors belonged. His feelings about this Catholic upbringing were quite negative. In particular, he was bitter about the way the sisters at the school he attended used to beat him when he was a boy. I suppose I might have let this other man's experience prejudice me entirely against Catholic nuns were it not that about the same time I came to know some Sisters of the Cenacle, whom I very much admired.

I think, however, of a nun whom I encountered many years earlier and with whom I never exchanged a single word. I used to pass her frequently in an underground passageway connecting subway stations in New York City. She was about my age, which is to say, in the early twenties. She was dressed in the old-fashioned style of habit and sat in a chair with an offering plate in her lap. And she had the most angelic face I have ever seen. Though I live for that eight hundred year span I mentioned a few weeks ago, I shall not forget that face.

Like most Protestants I didn't quite know what to make of nuns. They were some sort of aberration left over from the middle ages. It horrified me that hour after hour, day after day this angel should be sitting there in this twentieth century version of the passage to hell, begging nickles and dimes for some fool, Papist hocus pocus.

But in the end that face got me. It must have been the Irish in me, or possibly the Polish. There was something there so good, so pure, so dedicated, so beautiful that to look at her was to grasp in an instant a whole way of life. I knew that I could respect that way of life, even revere it. I still do, especially now that so many lifestyles are unworthy of respect. I hope that nun never got liberated.

My financial resources in those days were rather limited. I had been so irresponsible as to acquire a wife and a child before I began to study for the ministry. My father was paying most of the bills. But I couldn't keep walking by that nun without putting something in her plate. One day I put in a dollar. I didn't tell my father, but being Irish he would have understood. I never told my wife until now. She is Scotch. In unexpected ways, people stretch our horizons of appreciation.

Let me cite one more example. Here it was not a matter of coming to appreciate qualities of commitment in a setting foreign to my own. Here it was more a matter of discovering a shared concern hidden within another person.

There was a man who belonged to a church of mine whose wife and college age children had been very active in church affairs. He himself attended services quite regularly. Once or twice he attended with his wife a discussion group that I led. In those tumultuous times many heated issues were on our agenda: civil rights, the farm labor movement, the war in Vietnam, frustrated ministers. People in the group expressed very contrasting points of view. But I do not recall that this man ever expressed himself at all. My impression was that he was a conservative man, inwardly disturbed by a lot of things that were going on and a lot of things that were being said. But he himself said nothing.

There came then that day in the spring of 1970 when there occurred what was officially entitled "The Cambodian Incursion". A few days later came the shootings at Kent State College in Ohio. Almost instantaneously the mood of the nation changed, especially among the young. Hope turned to despair and from that turning the nation has not yet recovered. Nevertheless, one last rally was planned at the California state capitol. Even in despair people needed an outlet for their feelings. One of my daughters, who was then in high school, asked me if I would go to the rally with her. I said I would.

This march differed in certain respects from earlier ones. It took place late on a weekday morning and so there were fewer people with jobs. Most of those in the crowd were high school and college students who simply walked out of their classes. And the mood was different; it was angry and might well have grown ugly. Several thousand of us lined up in the capitol mall behind people from the Council of Churches holding signs. Above us were the bright new state and federal office buildings with their largely glass facades. Behind the glass we could see the government workers standing and looking out. Some people in the street shouted up at them:

"Why don't you come down and join us? What are you afraid of?"

But very few came down.

I looked back over the crowd to see if there was anyone whom I recognized. There was no one. Then towering above that sea of adolescent faces I saw a tall, middle-aged man. He had gotten up from behind his desk in one of those high-rise bureaucracies. While his fellow workers stood staring, he had gone down in the elevator, walked out to the street and without a word, taken his place in the march among somebody else's children. As I looked back, he nodded to me. It was the man who never said anything.

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"And he marvelled."

Sometimes even Jesus was caught by surprise. That happened when he ran into a stone wall of complacency and distrust. On other occasions he was taken back by qualities of faith and commitment in unlikely places.

In this respect Jesus was just like the rest of us. We too have marveled both ways. Perhaps it has never occurred to us, however, to ask whether other people ever have marveled at us. Have they been struck by our complacency, our lack of faith, and absence of commitment. Or on the other hand, have we shaken up other people by the evidence that there were depths of commitment in ourselves which they had not anticipated. As we have moved among people of a different sort, people of another religious outlook or of no religion, has there been something so obviously genuine about our faith that others come to respect it even though they do not share it? As we move among our own sort of people, do we surprise them at times by revealing that we are committed in ways they had not foreseen?

What sort of surprises would Jesus experience were he to walk in among us now?

It is a question worth pondering.

And when Jesus heard him he marveled, and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."