

DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING, STAND THERE!

March 15, 2014 Matthew 17: 1-9

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A few years ago, General Motors ran a commercial for their new Cadillac ELR that was made for and launched during the Olympics. I don't know if you realize it – I did not – but most commercials have titles so advertising agencies and sponsoring companies can keep track of them. This one was called "Poolside." It features actor, Neil McDonough, blond, handsome, and cocksure, touting not so much the car as the people who made it and, more importantly, the people who can afford to buy it. In fact, if you don't watch carefully, you don't even know it's about a car which is never mentioned in the ad. It's about hard driving, innovative, creative Americans and it pokes a playful stick in the eye of those laconic, lazy Europeans.

It opens with McDonough in t-shirt and Dockers standing beside a swimming pool in the backyard of a beautiful, modern house. He walks into and through the house as he speaks:

Why do we work so hard? For what? For this? For stuff? Other countries they work, they stroll home, they stop by the cafe, they take August off. Off. Why aren't you like that? Why aren't we like that?

(He walks through the house and hi-five's a teenager on the couch.) **Because we're crazy driven, hard-working believers, that's why. Those other countries think we're nuts. Whatever! Were the Wright brothers insane? Bill Gates? Les Paul? Ali?**

Were we nuts when we pointed to the moon? That's right, we went up there, and you know what we got? Bored. So, we left. Got a car up there, left the keys in it. Do you know why? Because we're the only ones going back up there. That's why. (He enters a room and immediately emerges wearing a light grey suit.)

But I digress... It's pretty simple. You work hard, you create your own luck, and you gotta believe anything's possible. (Gets in Cadillac.) **As for all the stuff, that's the up side of only taking two weeks off in August. N'est-ce pas?** (He winks and drives away.)

We Americans are doers. Inventors, creators, problem solvers, getters of things done. We don't like to "over think" things. We like to move them. And we are impatient when the doing slows down.

Take the **Keystone Pipeline**, for instance.

A 2,687-mile-long pipeline that carries crude and synthetic oil from Alberta, Canada to refineries in Nebraska, Illinois, and Texas. When the builders ran into objections and concerns about possible pollution from leaks and other issues, the builders changed their plan. It took 7 years to compete but it was completed and now delivers 596,000 barrels of oil per day. That's about 220 million barrels a year. We Americans are impatient people. When objections stall production, we adjust and keep going.

We can't understand why the leaders of **Ukraine and Russia** can't just sit down and agree on how to end this war. When they don't, we figure they just don't want to end it.

Same with **Gaza**. Okay, we get that Israel is not a Christian nation, that they are driven, in many cases, by the old eye-for-an-eye ethic but they have gone beyond that now. They have killed something like 60 for everyone that was killed on October 7, 2023. We look at that butchery and say we need to pull some strings and apply some pressure to end it. And we need to do it now.

Greenland, we see a need for a military presence in Greenland and instead of just expanding the base that we have there, we decide to buy the whole country.

Venezuela, we look at Venezuela's oil and how they are wasting it by poor management and we invade the country, overthrow the government, and establish one that is more amenable to our agenda. We are doers. We are problem solvers. We are getters of things done.

The urge to do is not limited to the macrocosm of national and international news. Parents face it every day with their children – young or old. Do we step in? Do we say something? Or should we keep our mouths shut and our opinions to ourselves? Let them learn as they go?

To do something or not to do something. What's a person – especially a Christian person – to do? If anything.

PETER'S DILEMMA

It's Peter's Dilemma, isn't it?

He goes with James and John up on that mountain with Jesus and he witnesses something about as amazing, as awesome, as powerful as anything that has ever happened in human history. So, it is not surprising that his impulse is to *do something*. We 21st century Americans can understand that perfectly. We're doers, after all.

First, he offers to do something that is traditional, helpful and, well, religious. Appropriate, no? It is what any of us would do upon having an eye-opening, mind bending, consciousness raising, spiritually electrifying experience. Peter offers to build three shelters or altars (depending on how you translate it). We would probably sing a hymn or say a prayer or have a potluck dinner or break into small groups and talk about it -- something that would put the experience in a familiar context so we could handle it. Same as Peter.

His first offer to build shelters or altars is refused outright. He is told, in kinder terms, to "shut up and listen." Stop running around doing things. Stop talking. *Stop!* And listen to Jesus.

Then, as they are descending the mountain Jesus knows that these three won't be able to keep their mouths shut about what they've seen. They're going to want to talk about this experience, to share it with others, to invite them to help them think it over and explain it.

But Jesus stops Peter before he can get started. "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." Peter obviously would not know what Jesus is talking about. Raised from the dead? What? The message here, is really for us, the reader.

The experience on the mountain cannot be fully understood until after Easter. You can't really talk about this experience until you know **the whole story**, in other words.

THE WHOLE STORY

The admonition to wait until you know the whole story is sage advice. Don't go off halfcocked. Don't talk before you know what you're talking about. Be sure you know all the pertinent facts before you speak.

As Christians we would often do well to "wait for Easter" before we speak or do. It is Easter that sets the context for everything that we do and say. We are resurrection people and it is the resurrection that should speak through our every word and action. Without it, we are just opinionated.

Easter is the ending that gives meaning to the whole story.

It's like those movies we love so much:

Remember, "The Sixth Sense?" "*I see dead people.*" We watched that whole movie and then in the last thirty seconds of the film there's a reveal that changes everything. Now we have to watch the whole movie over again because nothing we saw was what we thought it was.

Or "The Usual Suspects." We watch the whole movie asking the question, "Who is Keyser Soze?" And when his identity is finally revealed we realize that everything we just saw has shifted and now we have to watch the whole movie over again from a completely different perspective.

Or "No Way Out" the Kevin Costner/Gene Hackman thriller. Another movie where the final five minutes changes everything and redefines all that has gone before.

Or... well, you get the picture. We all have favorite movies or stories like that and Matthew is telling us in this story that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is one of those stories. The last chapter changes everything. Nothing has any real meaning until that chapter and then we have to go back to the beginning and read it all over again knowing what we now know.

We dare not talk about it at all unless we are sure that we have seen and understand the ending, because the ending is what defines the beginning and all that comes between the two. Only this is not Hollywood; this is real life. And we know from experience that if we act or speak before we know the whole story, we could find ourselves in a state of embarrassment if not big trouble.

THE REST OF THE STORY: FactCheck.org

Michael Cerpok, from Fountain Hills, Ariz., was featured in a local TV news segment on Oct. 3, 2003. The ABC15 report said that Cerpok, who was diagnosed with leukemia in 2006 and requires ongoing treatment, had received a letter from his insurer, Celtic Insurance Company,

saying that his policy wasn't "fully compliant" with the Affordable Care Act and would be canceled. Cerpok, a self-employed businessman, was paying \$855 per month for the policy for himself.

The report said his out-of-pocket costs in 2012 were only \$4,500, even though his treatment for leukemia totaled more than \$350,000. Cerpok wanted to keep the same doctor he had at the Mayo Clinic. He told ABC15: "Now it doesn't mean I can't go see my current doctor, but my \$4,500 out-of-pocket, is going to turn into a minimum of \$26,000 out-of-pocket to see the doctor that I've been seeing the last seven years."

That local Phoenix news segment went viral. It was highlighted by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank; cited in an ad from Americans for Prosperity, as the announcer says "Arizonans are losing the health care plans they love, the doctors they know"; and featured on many other conservative websites. Heritage Foundation President Jim DeMint wrote a letter in early October to President Obama that blamed the president for Mr. Cerpok's plight and said that the poor man would probably now have to take a second job just to stay afloat.

But wait for the whole story –

FactCheck.org spoke with Cerpok a month after the TV report aired, and things had changed. Come to find out, because Mr. Cerpok didn't agree with the Affordable Healthcare Act (Obamacare) he never actually looked on the federal exchange to see if he was eligible for a different health plan. Had he done so he would have discovered a bronze plan that was about \$600 per month cheaper than his former plan and a gold plan that offered virtually the exact same coverage and would allow him to keep his doctor for about \$300 less than his former plan.

As it happened, before he contracted leukemia, Mr. Cerpok was a martial artist and one of his students who saw the erroneous report on ABC15, owned an insurance agency and helped his former teacher find a comparable plan for about the same price he had been paying.

If we count the truth as important and we value honesty and accuracy, then it is incumbent upon us to make sure we know the whole story before we speak or act.

One more story and then I'll stop...

THE REST OF THE STORY 2.0: Third Grade Convicts

Freedom Schools were started by the Children's Defense Fund in 1995 and proven to be one of the most effective learning and reading enhancement programs ever developed. Here's how they work:

Elementary age children are enrolled in the Freedom School in their area. The Freedom School meets for six consecutive weeks, five days a week, from 8 AM to 3:30 PM in the summer at a church, school, or community center. The school is staffed by three adult administrators and college students who are paid interns on a ratio of 1 intern for every ten children. Schools serve a minimum of 50 children.

Every day the children are given two nutritious meals and the morning hours are spent on reading skills using a curriculum of 80 books chosen by professional educators and the Children's Defense Fund for their ability to enhance the child's reading ability as well as teaching other social skills.

The afternoons are spent in cultural enrichment, family engagement, intergenerational servant leadership, community involvement, conflict resolution, and social action. Activities may include arts and crafts, dance, music, field trips, sports, rehearsal for a finale event, and community service projects.

The Freedom Schools program has been studied and evaluated by more than a dozen nationally recognized universities and foundations and has been proved by all of them to be highly effective. Reading ability of children who participate in these programs increase an average of 2.2 grade levels, some as high as 4 grade levels in just six weeks.

The cost of conducting a Freedom School, however, is not insubstantial. The average total cost for one 6-week school for 50 children is about \$59,000 or approximately \$1200 per child.

Now everything that we know about Freedom Schools tells us that they are wildly successful and very worthwhile. That's why for the past 20 years, the Ohio River Valley District of the United Methodist Church provided the lion's share of funds (from your apportionments) to fund two schools in the inner city of Cincinnati.

I was a member of the Board of the United Methodist Foundation when a representative of the Freedom School Foundation came to one of our meetings to sell us on the Freedom School idea even though we were already pretty much sold. But just to drive the nail home, the speaker added this caveat: "When state departments of corrections go about predicting how many prison beds they're going to need ten years from now, the statistic they use is the reading level of third grade boys." Later in the speech, he amended the statement to say "African American third grade boys." I left the meeting excited about the possibilities represented by the Freedom Schools project, ready to urge my church to give to this cause and, possibly, to support such a project in Clinton County at some time in the future – a rural version of the Freedom Schools that had only, so far, been used in the inner cities. And I still think that would be a great idea.

I was equally appalled, as I drove home, at the idea that the reading scores of third grade boys were a reliable determining factor for prison populations ten years later. It was such a startling concept that I wanted to share it with my church. But, being naturally cautious about such things, I wanted to be able to adequately footnote and site my source, and I didn't have one.

So, I sent a text message to my son, the criminologist, asking him to give the old man a hand and tell me where I could find the data on this concept. It didn't take him long to get back to me: Sorry, Dad. There is no such data. The whole third grade reading scores thing is an urban legend that's been going around for about ten years. It's just not true.

Freedom Schools? Oh, yeah, they're great. Proven winners.

But the whole thing about 3rd grade reading scores predicting prison populations is just so much hokum. Man, I'm glad I checked before I spoke. I'm glad I learned the whole story before I told it.

It is always tempting to move, to act, to do before we know the whole story, but never more than in response to a spiritual high like the one Peter must have been feeling as he descended from the mountain that day. But Jesus advises caution.

It is not so much our duty to speak about the resurrection as it is to let the resurrection speak through us.

To paraphrase theologian Paul Tillich:

“Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything, do not perform anything, do not intend anything. Don’t just do something, stand there. And accept the fact that you are accepted!”

(Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted” from *The Shaking of the Foundations*)

AMEN