
A SMALL AND UNMIRACULOUS MIRACLE

BY MICHAEL CARD

Matthew 17:24-27:

²⁴ On their arrival in Capernaum, the tax collectors for the Temple tax came to Peter and asked him, “Doesn’t your teacher pay the Temple tax?”

²⁵ “Of course he does,” Peter replied. Then he went into the house to talk to Jesus about it.

But before he had a chance to speak, Jesus asked him, “What do you think, Peter*? Do kings tax their own people or the foreigners they have conquered?”

²⁶ “They tax the foreigners,” Peter replied.

“Well, then,” Jesus said, “the citizens are free!” ²⁷ However, we don’t want to offend them, so go down to the lake and throw in a line. Open the mouth of the first fish you catch, and you will find a coin. Take the coin and pay the tax for both of us.” (*New Living Translation*)

I find it interesting that only Matthew, the tax collector, chose to tell us the story of Jesus, Peter and the collectors of the Temple tax. But it is an interesting miracle for many other reasons. First of all, it is so unmiraculous.

In fact, if you look closely you’ll notice that the miracle itself isn’t even given. Matthew only tells us of Jesus’ instructions to Peter. There is no follow-up whatsoever. We are left to assume that everything happened just as Jesus said it would. (A safe assumption!)

His familiar hometown, Capernaum, seems to have changed as Peter and Jesus made their way back to his house, their base of operations in Galilee. Peter was still trying to cope with what Jesus had just revealed to them; that he was soon to die. Jesus’ promise of resurrection might have provided a measure of comfort to Peter, if only he or any of the others had been able to grasp it. The last few days had been a roller coaster ride for them all. First there was the intensity of his confession, then the dazzling Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop. How is a pious Jewish man supposed to recover after seeing Moses and Elijah?

But now the crowds were gone. What’s more, the excitement was missing too. They were, all of them, bone tired from their long journey. They were emotionally exhausted as well from all that Jesus had said about what awaited him in Jerusalem in the weeks

to come. As far as we know it was to be their last time to be in Capernaum together.

The fact that the Temple tax collectors had come to ask at all was still another indication that much had changed in Capernaum, that Jesus’ reputation was beginning to erode. After all, this was a tax from which Jesus should have been exempt, since religious teachers were normally not expected to pay the Temple tax. It was too great an emotional leap for the tired fisherman to return from his mountain top vision to the drudgery of taxes.

“Go take your hand line and cast into the lake. The first fish you bring up will have a coin in its mouth. Use it to pay the tax for both of us. After all, we don’t want to offend them.”

Peter reached behind the door and took his line and hook from the peg where he always left them hanging. Without a word he wandered down to the shoreline, puzzled that after being called to be a fisher of men he was now being asked to fish for fish once more. “Since when does he *not* want to offend anyone!” he muttered as he trudged down to the shore.

It is an enigmatic story to say the least. The depressed tone of the story can be read between the lines. Things had indeed changed for Jesus and his disciples in Capernaum. He is being treated in many ways like a foreigner, being asked to pay a tax from which he was clearly exempt. His statement about not wanting to offend anyone I find to be perhaps the most miraculous and mysterious part of the unmiraculous story.

I cannot help but believe that in addition to leaving out the miracle, Matthew chose for some unknown reason to leave out the real reason for the strange story of the coin in the fish’s mouth. And that is that once upon a time two tired servants of God stumbled back home to find, no longer a flock of the faithful, but demanding religious people waiting for them at the door. Knowing that the least indiscretion would only mean more conflict for the both of them, one chose to exercise his awesome and unlimited power to make appear out of nowhere a couple of dollars to pay the fee the men at the door were hounding them for. All this for the glorious purpose that the two of them might share an uninterrupted evening together of talk and meal fellowship since in a few days one of them would be leaving that place never to return.

A small and “unmiraculous” miracle, or was it?

*That the Lord of all would want to spend an uninterrupted evening with his best friend, is that not miraculous? “Pay the tax for *you and me*,” Jesus says.

*That Jesus would invite Peter to participate in making the miracle happen... is that not amazing?

I believe Jesus, who is the same yesterday, today and forever, is still about unmiraculous miracles. I trust and believe that his desire is still to spend time with me, a person he had called his friend. So let’s keep an eye out and look for these kinds of small, amazing miracles. He is doing them all around and in us everyday.

