

The Magic Pill
Matthew 16:21-28, Pentecost 11, Year A
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By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

You'll have to bear with me this morning. My head's in a bit of a fog. It's a big day, what with the Sunday school "sneak peak," my hope that people will re-commit to the life of the parish, and the big "Summer's Last Blast" celebration tonight. That, added to the list of pastoral care concerns facing the parish, causes my head to swim. Keeping things straight, remembering what's crucial and what's not, knowing the path forward, have all been difficult lately. I feel like I'm only using 20% of my brain.

But then, you know what that's like, right? Especially this time of year, when everything ramps up from zero to sixty, when the beach morphs into the rat race overnight, you can relate to the foggy-headedness, I feel sure.

I was in the throes of that feeling last week when Netflix delivered the movie "Limitless." The film's premise—if not its execution—is brilliant. We only use 20% of our brains, the film contends, and its protagonist, aspiring writer Eddie Mora, isn't even using his most effective 20%. His life is falling apart. The novel for which he's already received an advance from his publisher is unwritten. His rent is overdue. His girlfriend, understandably, has left him. His life is a fog, and he can't see the way forward.

Then Eddie runs into an old acquaintance who now works for a mysterious pharmaceutical company. The friend buys Eddie a drink and then gives him a single pill no bigger than a breath mint.

"They've identified these receptors in the brain," the drug salesman says, "that activate certain circuits. And you know how they say we can only access 20% of our brain? This lets you access *all of it*."

Eddie is skeptical, but he puts the pill in his pocket nonetheless before heading home. When he gets there, his landlord meets him in the hallway, and she threatens to evict him. As he listens to her, Eddie pops the pill, and within thirty seconds everything around him looks very different. Eddie's narrating voice says as the pill takes effect, "I was blind, and now I see."

It's not really fair to blame the Apostle Peter this morning. After all, consider all the things he has to keep straight. He's the *de facto* crew chief of Jesus' rag-tag band of disciples. He has to make sense of Jesus' parables and, let's admit, sometimes those are really opaque. And then, last week, he gets grilled by Jesus like a schoolboy. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks. And Peter answers well—as if the fog has lifted: "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God."

Good answer; the best, really. And the way Peter says it, with a full-stop period at the end, is like taking a pill: Down the hatch, and it's done. But, as we see in today's Gospel, once Peter has declared Jesus' identity, Jesus reveals to him and to all the apostles for the first time what he—Jesus—must do. He must go to Jerusalem and submit himself to suffering. He must be vulnerable even to death. And the disciples are to go with him.

"Wait...*what?*" Peter asks. Jesus' plan doesn't square with anything Peter has had in mind. The pill gets caught in his throat. The fog settles, and Peter is addled all over again.

For Eddie Mora, when that magic pill takes effect, it is as if the whole world is transformed around him. Colors are brighter. Sounds are crisper. Details are more nuanced and noticeable. Intuitively, Eddie realizes that the world has not changed, but rather his perception of it has. He now, for the first time, sees the world as it essentially *is* as opposed to seeing it through his customary human haze. And with that sight, the path forward opens as if for the first time. Eddie says, "I wasn't high, wasn't wired...just clear. I knew what I needed to do and how to do it."

For the rest of the film, Eddie's life is on fast-forward. He obtains a large supply of his magic pills, and he uses his clarity and mind-power to make millions day-trading stocks. He weaves his way into corridors of power and influence, always with the vague promise that he wants to do good for the world.

The catch is that every time the effect of the pill wears off Eddie's brain becomes more addled than ever. His fog is compounded by headaches and nausea. He learns that the very medicine that gives him clarity is slowly killing him. And, although he thinks he is blazing a virtuous and pristine path, almost without noticing it Eddie leaves behind him a wake of violence and destruction.

“I wasn’t high, wasn’t wired...just clear. I knew what I needed to do and how to do it.” That line taps into our deepest desire, doesn’t it? And the premise of “Limitless” also taps into our fantasy of finding the easy way there, the pill we can pop—either literally or metaphorically—that scatters the fog and takes our lives from 20 to 100%. We try anything, and the more exotic the better. Medicinally, new wonder pills (legal and illegal) emerge each year. Economically, we have recently swallowed such pills as collateralized debt obligations and no-doc mortgage loans. Religiously, we sometimes ingest the “prosperity Gospel” preached from sports arenas and network T.V., promising lives of blessing and ease if we pray in just the right way.

The commonality between all of these is their focus on what they can do *for us*. We’ll swallow them uncritically, and for a while the horizon may seem brighter. Until the effect wears off and we’re more addled than before, sometimes with devastation left in our wake.

So is, then, the clarity of “Limitless” just a fantasy? On one level, yes. There is no magic pill, and there never will be. There isn’t for us and there wasn’t for the Apostle Peter. Peter thought he’d discovered the path forward by simply declaring Jesus’ identity. He was wrong.

Clarity and the way forward can be had, and this morning Jesus shows us the way. “Set your mind not on human things,” he says, “but on divine things.” In other words, think not about how we can manipulate the world, or God, to benefit us, but rather what *God* would do *with* us.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

The new way forward does not involve something we quickly and easily can grab, grasp, and ingest, but rather a radical *giving away*.

That is the key to a different perception of the world, one in which colors *are* brighter, sounds *are* crisper, and details *are* more nuanced and noticeable. It is a new perception in which we see the world as it essentially *is*, as it is seen through the eyes of the One who made it.

We *can* live fully—100%—but doing so requires *first* that we, like Peter, name Jesus for who he is: the one who saves us from ourselves and our false panaceas, and *second* that we give ourselves away 100% to this Jesus who is the Christ. For you see, that’s *how* he saves us. Giving ourselves away to him is how our perception begins to change.

This is not theoretical. It is prayerful and internal, to be sure. It is also external and tangible. So beginning today, what might it mean? What might it look like to take up the cross and follow, to give ourselves away? One possible first step awaits us in the narthex, just outside these doors, where four ministries of this parish are in need of having some of us walk with them alongside Jesus. There are myriad other ways to give ourselves to God in this place as well. Wherever and however we begin, as the practice of giving ourselves to God takes hold, the path will extend with greater clarity into all aspects of our lives. We will begin to live fully—100%—and we will see the world clearly, as God sees it, as *his* kingdom—bright, nuanced, and clear—for which we were made to serve. And what we will be able to accomplish for that kingdom is limitless.

Amen.