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A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Dr. W. Douglas Hood, Jr.
at Union Chapel in the Grove
Shelter Island Heights, New York

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DELRAY BEACH

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“The Language of Mystery”

Psalm 91:14-16

Matthew 14:13-21

Listen for God’s Word:

“Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.”

Matthew 14:20, 21

I heard a delightful story some years ago about a mother cat and her three kittens. One morning they were out on a stroll when suddenly a large, angry dog appears. The mother cat quickly shuttled her kittens under a nearby porch. Then she turned and walked confidently toward the large dog. She moved closer and closer until she was nose to nose with the dog. Looking at the dog straight in the eye, the mother cat released a bark equal to that of any respectable German Shepherd. With that, the large, angry dog turned and ran away. The mother cat returned to her kittens and said to them, “Now I am going to explain to you the importance of learning a second language!”

Pastor Daniel Matthews says that one of the greatest challenges facing the church today is the challenge of learning a second language. What he speaks of is not French, or German, or Italian. Matthews is talking about the language of mystery.

Perhaps you have heard the story of a Sunday school teacher who never learned the language of mystery. He taught little children and the appointed lesson for the morning was the Exodus story – the story of God’s people being taken through the Red Sea. You know the story, perhaps from that great Cecil DeMille movie, *The Ten Commandments*. There in the wilderness the Red Sea was in front of the people of Israel. Behind them was the Egyptian army coming for them – to return them to slavery in Egypt. Moses lifts his staff and by God’s power the sea is parted and the entire nation of Israel walks through to the other side.

Well, that is how the story goes if you understand the language of mystery. This teacher did not. His only language was the dominant one spoken today – the language of reason. So he retold the story of the Exodus in the only language he knew. His version went something like this: At that particular time of year, in that particular place in the world, for that particular ocean, the water was only six or seven inches deep, shore to shore. The ocean didn’t open up for the people to walk across. They simply walked right through it, much like people today can walk great distances in the Florida Keys before the water is even waist deep.

Well, with that version of the story a little child shouted out, "Halleluiah!" The teacher said to the child, "Don't you understand? This wasn't so dramatic. The water was only six to seven inches deep." Again, the child shouted, "Halleluiah!" The teacher is now a bit rattled. "Why do you keep shouting, 'Halleluiah'?" The water was only six or seven inches deep." The boy answered that by God's great power, the entire Egyptian army was drowned in six or seven inches of water! There was a boy that spoke the language of mystery.

This morning our faith presses against another dramatic story in the Bible. It is the story of Jesus feeding 5,000 men plus women and children. Did you pay attention to the detail that Matthew gives in sharing this story? Many of us hear the story incorrectly. Jesus didn't feed 5,000 people that day. Jesus fed 5,000 men *plus* women and children who were also present. What are we to do with this story?

Those who haven't learned the language of mystery explain it this way. There was something about Jesus, his personality, his charm, his authority that changed people's hearts that day. Jesus didn't really make food miraculously appear to feed so many. Many of the people present had secret food on them, food for their families and for themselves. They showed up to hear Jesus teach but they kept their food a secret. They feared that others may want their food and there wouldn't be enough. But something about Jesus changed their hearts and they began to share their food with others who were

hungry. That is the language of reason.

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The difficulty with that explanation is this: Whether Jesus made food miraculously appear to feed thousands or people's hearts were made more generous by his words doesn't matter. The point of the story is that Jesus changed what was going to happen that day. Either way, the language of mystery was spoken.

Dale Bruner, a widely acknowledged New Testament scholar, tells us that in this story the disciples learned to count to eight. There were five loaves plus two fish plus Jesus. The language of mystery always includes Jesus in the mathematical equation. Five loaves and two fish plus Jesus always equals more than enough.

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There are some who refuse to learn the language of mystery. They haven't personally experienced mystery so they argue that it doesn't exist. Thomas Jefferson, one of our nation's presidents, was such a person. He loved God, he gave his life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ but he didn't speak the language of mystery.

So steeped in the language of reason, Jefferson removed all the miracles and mystery from the Bible. He removed all that he could not grasp with his own understanding. What he created is known today as the Thomas Jefferson Bible. Absent from this Bible is every miracle, all mystery including the resurrection story.

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The movie, *Jurassic Park* is not simply about dinosaurs, though it is certainly about that. The movie is bigger than dinosaurs. It is about the language of mystery. If you saw the movie, you will remember that a wealthy man developed Jurassic Park to be an amusement destination. He only spoke the language of reason. He says at one point in the movie, “We can control these reptiles.”

Another character in the movie, Dr. Malcolm, answers that there is a new language that science is coming to appreciate. It is the language of mystery. It is a language that tells us that we can’t understand or control everything. Dr. Malcolm is concerned about the very idea of bringing to life again the dinosaurs of another age. “These dinosaurs will break out!” he declares. He was correct. The dinosaurs do break out.

My friend, Thomas Long tells the story of when he was asked to teach a children’s Sunday school class on Pentecost Sunday. With all the passion and enthusiasm he could muster, Tom Long tells the children that Pentecost is the day that the heavens broken open and the Holy Spirit came down upon the earth. Great power was released among the people and various languages began to be spoken. Every child was engaged – every child except Johnny. Johnny was apparently unmoved, staring intently out the classroom window, seemingly bored. “Johnny, have you heard anything that I have said?” asked Tom Long. “Yes, teacher, I heard.” “Then what do you think it all means?” asked Tom. “It means that God climbed down to earth from heaven. It means that God is now loose in the world. It means that nothing is going to be the same again.” There is a child who speaks the language of mystery. Amen.

*This is a sample meditation that is posted weekly on Dr. Hood's blog
<http://firstdelray.blogspot.com>
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The Allure of a Defeated Life

*"I was given a thorn in my body."
2 Corinthians 12:7 (Common English Bible)*

Few things are as unfortunate than to see a woman or man losing heart and all sense of hope, drifting into apathy, and finally despair. When a sense of defeat is permitted to take residence in a life, frustration and inaction are too frequently the result. The face becomes sullen, the head is held low, and the shoulders sag. Bitterness grows, the result of an erroneous belief that life has dealt a raw deal or that others have received better opportunities. Left unchecked, the self-pity sentences them to low levels of achievement. A strange comfort is found in simply giving-up – experiencing a certain allure of being defeated.

History is replete with men and women who have experienced hardship, anguished over setbacks, and struggled with handicaps – physical, mental and emotional. Anyone of them may have been resentful and rebellious – and many have – with bad behavior the consequence. Yet, there are others who rise above the circumstances of their lives, press forward with unbelievable determination and consecrate their lives to the service of others. The apostle Paul stands among them. Paul moved through life hindered by “a thorn in the body” but produced nearly two-thirds of our New Testament.

Rather than giving-up and accepting defeat, Paul labored under his handicap. Naturally, Paul – like any of us – preferred that the handicap be corrected, the difficulty removed. On three occasions Paul asked the Lord for this. But the handicap remained; the thorn wasn't removed. But Paul's prayers were answered. “My grace is enough for you,” answered God. With God's answer, Paul committed himself to do the very best he could do with what he had. His life and ministry was a vessel of hope for everyone he encountered. To his children, Theodore Roosevelt continually cultivated a hopeful disposition – and in doing so charged the atmosphere of his home with hope.

Paul sought to demonstrate in his life that there is no limitation, no misfortune, no burden of sorrow, suffering or loss that the human spirit cannot rise above. He endured much of each. But Paul went deeper than self-discipline and self-determination. Paul triumphed over it all because he sought God. Perhaps this was the finest message that Paul left the church – that when the allure of defeat tempts the heart Paul calls us to that deeper place where our life is open to the grace and power of Almighty God.