

June 24, Ordinary 12B (Mark 4:35-41)

## **What do we miss when we seclude ourselves on safe shores of sameness?**

by [Willie Dwayne Francois III](#) in the [June 6, 2018](#) issue

Mark reports no deliberation before Jesus says, “Let us go across to the other side.” No doubt the disciples’ moral and emotional senses receive an astonishing jolt. This is the first time the Jesus movement ventures toward gentile land. The other side of the sea represents hostile territory, people presumed undeserving of what a messianic project intends. I imagine a question mark on the disciples’ faces as Jesus directs them to set sail for this community of others. Jesus invites them to detach from the familiar shores of Capernaum toward the strange and foreign shores of the Gerasenes.

“Let’s not be afraid to receive each day’s surprise,” writes Henri Nouwen, “whether it comes to us as sorrow or as joy. It will open a new place in our hearts, a place where we can welcome new friends and celebrate more fully our shared humanity.”

Sometimes Jesus’ call has an intrusive quality. We have to live in a posture of flexibility and adaptability, because we don’t know when God will expand our life to see other shores. Many people anchor their lives on familiar shores by committing too much of their energy to cautious preparation—when God may want to move instantaneously. Too often people of conscience and good will deliberate themselves into stagnation. We spend our energy thinking about divine directives and invitations instead of pursuing them. It can be dangerous to spiritualize inaction. We can clutter our hearts with thoughts that weigh down our feet and cuff our hands.

Jesus has had great success on this familiar shore. He called Peter, Andrew, James, and John on this shore—and they came alive here. This is a memorable shore, an important fixture in the disciples’ biographies with Jesus. He taught his first parables on this shore. He cast out demons. He called Levi, the despised tax collector, on this shore. The disciples witnessed revival here and gave up their old lives. On this shore, their lives were revolutionized forward.

And Jesus invites revolutionaries to leave the satisfaction of tested shores and undertake a journey toward the unknown. I can imagine the disciples' trepidation, leaving this side to pursue an unfamiliar and untested future on the other one. But risking our love of familiar shores is what enables us to ride the waves of God toward new shores that will deepen our humanity, expand our vocational identity, and contextualize our prophetic agenda.

Jesus is inviting us to the other side, where stigmatized, marginalized, and demonized people live. Other shores are populated by others, and God's work finds its root in our encounters with them. After the chaos of the storm on the sea, Jesus and the disciples land on a shore where they encounter the Gerasene demoniac. In the United States, where hegemonic groups render whole classes of others invisible, the people of Jesus need the social and spiritual exposure of other shores.

The normative logic of the world inculcates fear and fetishization of the other. In our Gospel text the others merely live across a lake, but a world of difference separates them from the disciples. Others in America might live across town or across the hall—but we live socially constructed worlds apart. The others are the ones James Cone refers to as being under “the threat of nonbeing.”

Creative encounters with the other prove socially and morally salvific. They save us from projected senses of superiority, tragic blind spots, and the logic of normativity. It is criminal to be too cautious when our vision for a better world requires the creative encounters of other shores—people, ideas, values, and practices unaligned with what we hold to be absolute.

What life do we miss when we seclude ourselves on shores of safety and sameness? On the other side of the sea awaits just as much growth, learning, and life for the disciples as what Jesus intends to offer those who live there. The shores of others await our moving feet, open minds, and growing hearts. We have to choose the shaky boat with Jesus, hurling through uncharted waters toward the dense unknown, over the insulated shores where things make sense and our hearts shrink.

According to Emmanuel Levinas, we know God—the sacred—when we encounter the face of the other. He writes, “The face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death.” People are responsible for each other, face to face. The face of the other demands us to do more and be more for the ones who are not us. Through the face of the other, God

invites us into a binding community of love.

Life-enhancing beauty emanates from the faces of others. The struggling moral health of America depends on our courage to see the other, to stare at the face of the other and find transcendence in difference.

A stigma can make human beings invisible. It takes an “appearing act” to make seeable the unseen—the dispossessed, disinherited, and disaffected. This is holy work for people of faith. The disciples leave the shores of Capernaum for another shore, a place to enlarge their spirits and renew their vocation of love. Love contests the politics of exclusion; it disrupts practices of propriety. Love shrinks the distance between shores. The authentic embrace of difference challenges our values and our moral nerve center. We Jesus people can foster the spiritual stamina and the moral longing to search for other shores.