

Series: VISION SUNDAY - September 18, 2011

**TOTALLY UNEXPECTED...
Matthew 14**

1. A number of years ago, I planned a surprise birthday party for Lori. It was one of more significant birthdays—but I can't tell you which—or I could die prematurely. To pull this off, all the invitations and planning were done in secret—and I actually had a photo album made up, entitled **40 Years of Lori**. Oops! I told you! Then I had to **lie** to her to get her to cooperate. That's right, public confession, I lied! But that's part of the deal, isn't it? For it to be a **surprise** party for someone—you have to actually **surprise** them.

-Surprise throws you off-guard—which is why it works so well in warfare. Last week my son, Brian, and his friend went to Ground Zero in NYC for the 10th anniversary of 9-11. **[pics]**. How many of you remember **exactly** where you were and what you were doing when the planes hit the towers 10 years ago? Surprise does that. **Everything** stops.

-Have you ever noticed that **bad** things seem to happen by surprise...and shock us? The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and JFK; Princess Diana's death; Pearl Harbor—for a previous generation. Question: Has anyone here ever been shocked by **good** news—so much so that you can remember exactly where you were? Good News seems to be **way** more subtle.

2. I've been at points in my life when I've thought, "I've had enough **bad news** for a while—I need about a 3 year run of **good news!**" Can anyone relate to that? Then I realize that the good news is many times there—but it doesn't grab the headlines. In any given day, I can have three good news story—and one bad. Guess which one I dwell on—and **still** remember at the end of the week? Bad news, of course.

-Part of it has to do with the fact that we're afraid of bad news, right? When bad things happen—like 9-11—we think, "I wonder what other terrible things are about to happen—things I would **never** anticipate!" Yet we almost **never** think, "Wow! I wonder what good things are on their way **right this very minute!?**"

-And yet, the **Good News**—the story of God's intervention in history to make all things right—actually has a good news/ bad news rhythm to it. You'd think that when God Himself shows up—it would be one continuous string of good. His birth was extraordinary by **any** standard—with angels and foreign visitors. And yet Mary experienced rejection from Joseph and her family—and their little family had to run for their lives and live as fugitives in Egypt. And that's the way it went.

-I was recently reading through Matthew 14—and I was struck by the how, in just a matter of days, Jesus and his closest followers seemed to be on this roller-coaster ride of good news and bad news—high highs and low lows.

- a. Right before the events recorded in Matthew 14, Jesus gives an amazing message about this Kingdom that he's come to bring. People in his day

expected the Messiah to make an apocalyptic entrance and vaporize all evil. Jesus said, “It’s way more subtle than that—more like a seed growing into a bush or yeast working through dough—or a treasure hidden in a field. He said, “Good and evil? They’ll grow alongside each other—and get sorted out at the end.

-And almost as if to punctuate this, Jesus visits his home town of Nazareth—and is rejected by the friends and family he grew up with because he seems too normal.

- b. Well, in Matthew 14 it gets worse. Jesus’ closest companion in ministry, John the Baptist, is beheaded by the Jewish king—Herod—at a drunken party—and his head served on a platter to his step-daughter. Jesus gets the news—and tries to grieve privately with his disciples. But thousands of people find out where he’s gone—and follow him. Jesus responded the way He always responds:

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:14 NIV)

- c. Well, it starts to get late, people start to get hungry—and Jesus says to his disciples, **You feed them!** Another astounding miracle. A kid gives up the bag lunch his mother packed him—and Jesus multiplies it into at least 2 ½ **tons** of food and feeds 5000 men, plus women and children. **Unbelievable** miracle!

-So Jesus sends his disciples out to cross the Sea of Galilee at night—while he stays and prays. Turns out—they hit his massive storm; it’s so bad, their lives are in danger. **Bad news**, right? So—Jesus walks out to them. Good news—Jesus is here! Jesus invites Peter to walk on the water—more good news. But Peter loses faith and sinks. Bad news. Jesus rescues him—and totally stops the wind and waves. Good News.

- d. When they get to the other side, Gennesaret, another crowd shows up—and a **lot** of people are healed. Sounds like good news, right? But there’s an edge. John tells us that Jesus confronts the crowd about using Him to get fed and healed. He says, **I Am the Bread of life!** Guess what happened at the end of his teaching?

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. (John 6:66 NIV)

- e. And **that**, friends, is how Jesus ministry goes—and ends. Good news—astounding miracles and crystal clarity on what it means to love God...and love others. But despite thousands of **amazing** miracles—to a crescendo of raising a man who had been dead for four days, Jesus’ life ends with **bad news**.

-After a huge celebration—Jesus hailed as the Son of David, the Saviour, the Messiah when he entered Jerusalem things, once again, turned. But Friday afternoon of that same week, it was more of a 9-11 moment. “Did you hear?”

Jesus, the guy who did all the spectacular miracles—died in the most shameful, humiliating way possible—pretty much abandoned by everyone. It was a 9-11 moment. “I remember **exactly** where I was when I got the news!”

-What’s **strange** is that **the most spectacular news in history**--that Jesus conquered death--just trickled out. I mean, Jesus **could’ve** made the whole even spectacular. Flattened Rome, nuked the religious professionals who planned the whole thing. But instead—the news that split history into two big chunks and offered hope for every single person on the planet traveled from person to person. And even some of Jesus core followers snorted, “I’m not gonna believe that!”

3. So. Jesus is risen—and from that point on, everything is **Good News**--up and to the right—**right?** When you read the history of the church—there’s both Good News—**really** Good News—and bad news, too. Thousands responding; the spreading of the Good News to all the people Jesus had said they would reach. There’s ecstasy—and frustration. There’s grace—and judgment.

-For the next 1900 years, it would appear that the **Good News** spread—created amazing moves of God and changed lives. These people started hospitals and schools, laid their lives on the line to help people when there were plagues. Some even sold themselves into slavery to free others from it!

-But that didn’t make the headlines. The **bad** news did. , The splits. The church as a bully and a murderer. The scandals—with the tele-evangelists doing scummy things, faking miracles—priests molesting hundreds of children. The history of Jesus’ Body, the Church—has been like the history of Jesus’ life; times when **thousands** gathered, then walked away because they didn’t like what He said. The history of Jesus’ people is kinda up and down and sideways. It was birthed in pain...and glory—and continues to experience pain...and glory.

-You may be thinking, “Ken—**why** are you bringing all this stuff up?” It’s because **our** history as The Olive Branch reflects this same reality. Many of you are aware that The Olive Branch was birthed in pain and blood. Bad news. But a group of about 30 people said, “Maybe God is at work in the middle of all this mess and pain? Maybe this mess and pain is about birth—not death!”

-And God’s nagging question to me was, “**What about Markham?**” Well we began to meet and dream and talk. The story of the catastrophe Noah survived struck home—with the first sign of life being an **olive branch** that a dove brought to him out of the mud and death. We thought, “That fits! The Olive Branch has always been a symbol of peace and reconciliation—and it is a symbol that after a catastrophe, life can still flourish!”

-The more we talked about life, birth and forgiveness, the more hope grew. Right in the middle of the bad news, God began to open doors—**good news** flowed in. God opened this amazing door for us to use Angus Glen Gold Course. A little over a year later, it news all over North America—literally-- when we turned a strip club into a church! Now we had a **place!**

-But most important question about **The Olive Branch** wasn't *where will we meet?* It was, **What kind of people is God calling us to be?** God already has *plenty* of consumers—people who will gather for free bread and miracles. The phrase that stuck with us was, ***This is NOT about us! If we make it about us—we'll contaminate it!*** God's love, as always, was to *love* to give our lives away. The price tag was bad news **and** good news. It would cost us dearly—but it wasn't a price tag to be figured into some tax refund—it was an *investment* in the souls of people. ***That's*** what grabbed us! The price still stings—but, then, we haven't fully seen the reward...yet!

4. Occasionally—it's good to revisit a vision—because, see, sometimes people never **hear** it—and sometimes people **forget!** We started with **Mission**. See, most of us had been around **missions**—but hadn't fully grasped what it would mean to **be a mission!**

Definition of a MISSION: A critically important cause that absolutely must succeed because of something valuable at stake. Because it is a life and death thing, our mission demands the very best we can give. It demands concentration, devotion, and sometimes it requires inconvenience and, almost certainly--sacrifice. But it is so big, so important, so worthwhile—it's worth it all.

-Our mission is the same as Jesus' mission: To seek and save the lost. To be a part of reconciling **all** things to their Creator and Owner. To be, not just another church, but to BE A MISSION to the undecided. To help people who are undecided about Jesus Christ become transformed by deciding to put their full trust in Him—and in turn become fully devoted to Christ and His mission. We believe that as we, those who have chosen to follow Jesus, selflessly take on this mission, we will find our hearts filled with a depth of significance, joy, and companionship that we have never known before. We believe that, in serving Jesus Christ in this way, we will grow to be the persons we have always longed to be. To do this:

- a. We will have to be people who extend the olive branch. People who extend the peace and reconciliation God offers to those who have never heard that God longs for their friendship; People who exude love and offer hope, a second chance to a community that has pretty much lost hope and given up on the church.
- b. We want to discover the wonder and amazement of loving community—the power, grace, joy and generosity experienced in the Acts 2 church. To see this happen, our goal is to respect and worship God as our Father and yet Lord of the Universe and treat others as the cherished, children of God that they are.
- c. We want to be a church filled with fun. That's right—we think celebration, adventure and surprise should be a part of how we live, worship and serve the world. We expect to be filled with unexplainable joy—and awe, to laugh and cry, mourn and celebrate—together; to experience the encouragement and satisfaction of community—even if only two or three are gathered.

- d. Every mission has to be driven by both passion and compassion. And true compassion is seen in the form of practical help for the people of our community and beyond. We believe that The Olive Branch could be one of our communities greatest assets as we live as **Good News** wherever we found ourselves and, as a community, offer practical help to anyone in need.
- e. As a mission, we do not want to be defined by walls; a mission has no walls. Safety and security for all of those entrusted to our care? Of course. But we refuse to be **contained**—where walls become barriers between us and those God has called us to help, love and serve. We would **love** to see community extended from us to all the neighbourhoods were we find ourselves. We want to be **good news** wherever we are—offering lasting friendship and support—**being** the connecting point for a wide cross-section of people.
- f. As a mission, we long to find a way to reach out to and penetrate ethnically and culturally diverse people groups, enlisting the support and assistance of other churches and organizations—starting in Markham—and then going far beyond anything we can imagine. We believe that God could use us to reach diverse people groups through us—and then people and places we would never touch through their networks of relatives and friends. This fits our core belief that the world is changed, one person at a time.
- g. As a mission, we vow to be a safe community for both decided **and** undecided people to **belong**—where people are free to be authentic, explore the claims of Jesus Christ, feel the power of the Holy Spirit, and experience the love of the Father. Our desire is that the undecided people in our community and the world would **believe** in Jesus—put their faith fully in His death to give them life. That we would encourage and equip people to be **become** all God created them to be—and then be released to **bless** the people, the neighbourhoods and the contexts where they find themselves—and **beyond**.
- h. As a mission, we don't expect to stay small, cozy and safe. We expect to grow exponentially, while intentionally maintaining intimacy and relational depth through biblical community. We say that because we believe that we have been called by God into existence—commissioned, not just to be another local church, but to be a movement of God. We do not take this lightly. We are serious about advancing the Kingdom of God in every possible way we can....

*Until the Good News touches every part of our culture; every office, every business, every school, every neighbourhood, every heart.

*Until the Good News begins to free people from whatever has them chained up, until it brings equality where there is social injustice, until it brings hope to the hopeless and the acceptance and grace of God to all those for whom Christ died.

*Because our mission is **so** critical, we will not waste time and energy playing church—or politics. We will not treat The Olive Branch as a shopping mall—providing spiritual nourishment to be consumed while we pursue other stuff. We will treat The Olive Branch, the advance of the Kingdom, the infiltration of

God into human affairs in **every** part of this world as the **Treasure** Jesus spoke of—as the Hope of the world-- not as a hobby or an extra-curricular activity.

*We will advance Christ's interests at every opportunity, with all the creativity, energy, and intelligence we can scrounge up. We are committed to pursuing what is effective, good and right—even if it means drawing criticism or trying new ways and methods that seem weird and unorthodox.

*We will always be looking for new ways to expand, grow and stretch toward our redemptive potential in Christ.

- i. As a mission, we will learn and speak well the heart language of the people God has called us to reach. Our goal is **not** to perpetuate religious traditions, but to use whatever means are at our disposal to help everyone see that the Good News of the Kingdom in all of its power and beauty. We will **remember** that we are a **mission**—not a **club!**

- j. Through the grace and power of God we will pursue the character and life of Jesus:
 - *Patient, enduring, self-sacrificing love and acceptance
 - *Serving others in the Power of God, to the extent that what happens cannot be explained in terms of finances, talent, opportunity, chance, or anything other than the intervention of God.
 - *Prayer. Without God's help there is **no** way we will accomplish this dream. So, we need to have passionate, loving conversations with God. Call on Him. Not because it seems like the Christian thing to do, but because God is in every room, every car, every home—wherever we are--and waits to be acknowledged, spoken to, and listened to.
 - *His compassion for the poor, the broken, the disenfranchised, the ignored, the disadvantaged, and the powerless.
 - *His humility. We will take remember that we are **not** God—we are simply His servants. We will not over-estimate our gifting, or under-estimate the value of others, but live in the reality that we exist in God's world as His treasured children—sent to do His will. *Excellence. Simply put, we will not give God our leftovers—the scraps of time and money we have left after serving ourselves. We will give Him our **best!** *Love, care and respect for people. Because Jesus gave his life for people, we will value them more than things, methods, structures, and opinion.
 - *Deep love for and commitment to the undecided, however far they may be from the purposes of God and the guardrails He's given for human life
 - *God's Word will have the final say in all we do. We will live with an enthusiastic respect for all that God has said about life and about Himself. We will be people of the Word. Everything we do and say will be rooted in God's truth; we will allow it to inspire us, challenge us, rearrange our world, and transform us.
 - *Development and growth. We will use every means and every opportunity to help people, free people, to become all God created them to be—body, soul and spirit. Our goal is to see **every** person in our world experience the grace of God, grow in their faith, become a part...and serve with a loving community of people, discover who God has created them to be, and generously their lives and resources back into the Kingdom.

*Transparency and honesty. We will be open and transparent as a community with our records, transactions and dealings. The Leadership will be accountable to the Ministry Partners of The Olive Branch—and to our very best to make sure there are no BAD surprises, only GOOD ones.

*Faith and courage. This is **not** about **us**. Therefore, we will give ourselves with outrageous generosity so we can make a significant impact on our world.

5. So, with this lofty vision—what has actually happened? Well, like **all** visions—and **all** visionaries—even Jesus—there have been some **incredible** highs. And there have been some gut-wrenching lows. There's been success in what we hoped to be...and what we hoped to do. There's also been failure. Some experiments have worked **very** well. Some have bombed!

-Remember what I said about Jesus' life? Crowds—and people who've walked away saying, "I don't think so!" We've experienced that too! Sometimes I've been **very** encouraged—and there have been times when I've wanted to just give up.

-Two things I need to say;

***First**—we haven't even come **close** to accomplishing all we set out to do. By the way, that's actually a good thing. If we had been able to do it—our vision would've been **way** too small!

***Second**—I **also** believe with all my heart that God's Kingdom—the sphere of his effective will on this planet—has grown because of The Olive Branch; I believe Markham and the surrounding community is a better place; I believe the influence of The Olive Branch has grown the **Kingdom**—and spread to **many** places in the GTA—too many to count. I believe that many, many people have been healed, encouraged and blessed because of a group of people who call themselves, simply, The Olive Branch.

*So, despite the scars—and, at times, being disillusioned and tired, we are better, wiser followers of Jesus. Has it been worth it? You bet! And in the process, approximately 250 people have been baptized in the past 7 years.

*We've experienced God's incredible provision—the loaves and the fishes. When the challenge came to buy this building—we stepped out in faith. After talking the original owners down from \$10 million to \$4.925 million—we **still** only had 3 weeks to come up with \$2 million in cash. God challenged us to give what was **uncomfortably affordable**. And, by God's grace it happened.

*It's tough to say—but just like the early church—we've suffered—and **caused** suffering. Like Jesus' life and ministry—there are times when it feels like we're going forward—and times when it seems like we're going **backward!** Man has it been a ride!

6. Over the past couple of years, we have been in a season of change. As you grow, as you face new circumstances—you **have** to change, right? Our culture, right now, is changing rapidly. In the 30 year span that I've been a minister—our culture's perception of God, the Bible, followers of Jesus—and **especially** the Church has changed dramatically. People have **always** been ambivalent and disinterested; but now the range dips to downright hostility. **That** is the reality in our world.

-We have a choice. We can moan, cry, howl, circle the wagons, sing our favourite hymns and do our best to attract people who are already believers. Or—we can do what we actually set out to do; be a **mission**. Some of the questions we've been asking ourselves at the leadership level are:

*What, specifically, is the mission of God in this world? That's pretty much what we spent the past year looking at.

*Secondly, God is **already** at work everywhere—in every heart; how can we join Him—and help make His glory visible to people who don't know Him—and see that Jesus is real, that **He** is the One who offers hope to the hopeless; that **he** is the one who transforms greed to generosity; the **He** is the power behind any positive change in our world—from poverty to ecology. That Jesus doesn't hang out in church buildings—that He travels the world!

*The third question is—how can we as God's people **be** Good News wherever we are? How can we see ourselves, not as consumers—but as **sent**, in Jesus' Name, to infiltrate our world with the goodness and love of God—and a **message** of Good News that God offers forgiveness and restoration. *If you check history, what you find is that wherever true followers of Jesus have gone as the salt of the earth and the light of the world--the world has changed. Good things happen—hospitals, schools, the hungry fed, bullying has stopped—and people have ultimately been able to say, **It's a good thing they're here!**

-The simplest part—and yet the toughest part—of our vision statement has been, **We want to be one of Markham's greatest assets**. That doesn't mean being the **best church in the community**. It does mean being the **best church for the community!**

-I'll tell you what that means for us; it will mean healing the broken and equipping people to live out their calling as **SENT** people; the salt of the earth, the light of the world.

7. I want you to dream for a few minutes this morning. Dream a **big** dream. A dream so big that only God could pull it off—like feeding 5000 people from a single lunch! I want you to imagine that after we gather on weekends—the fire and light we carry does not cool and dim until it gets stoked up again on weekends. No--it actually sparks and **creates** fire and light—some of which are, in a good way, **burning out of control!**

-Imagine a group of people who don't envy the lives and stuff of their neighbours—but live a **quality** of life and peace and grace that **creates** a longing in their neighbourhoods. Imagine the people where we work saying of us, "I hope she becomes **my** boss. I want to work for someone like that!" Imagine schools where students say, "I hope I get him for a teacher next year!" Imagine a community that says, "I am **so** glad that The Olive Branch is here! If they left, they would leave a huge hole!"

-Imagine people in the GTA who are in pain—who say, "There's this group of people somewhere in this area—and their sacrificial love changed my life!" Imagine whole areas of need in the world where people say, "I don't know **where** the heck Markham is—but some people from there gave us **clean water** to drink and saved our kids!"

-Best of all—imagine standing before Jesus in eternity. Suddenly you **see** how your tiny acts of love and sacrifice and compassion—living and telling the Good News, brought beauty and life and wholeness that you never even dreamed of. Imagine meeting--not just 250 people who were baptized—but entire family lines whose futures were totally changed—because you and I said, ***This is NOT about us!***

8. There's an old, tired song that would not be cool to sing today—but whose words still move me.

When others see with earthly eyes just what they want to see--you will see the things that never die. You will know and recognize by simple child-like faith the priceless truth that others will deny.

If in a simple carpenter, you see the Son of God--if you would chose to lose when you could win; if you would give your life away for nothing in return--then you are where

My kingdom will begin.

Upon this rock I'll build My kingdom--and on this rock forever and ever it shall stand. And all the powers of Hell itself shall never more prevail against it--for Satan's thrones are built on sinking sand. Upon this rock I'll build My kingdom, and on this rock forever and ever it shall stand. Upon this rock of revelation, I'll build a strong and mighty nation--and it *shall* stand the storms of time...upon this rock.