

The Courage to Believe
Matthew 14:22-33
August 13, 2017 – Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Today's Gospel reading has an important lesson for us – for you and me as individuals, for our church as a congregation, for our denomination, and maybe even for our country. There is a richness in the story of Jesus stilling the storm that deserves considerable attention. But before we get to the storm and the sea, let us not skip over the beginning of this reading. Jesus had the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while he dismissed the crowd. After he dismissed the crowd, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. Did you hear that? Jesus went off by himself to pray. Even Jesus, even the Son of God himself needed to pray, needed to be in relationship with God the father. Indeed, the Bible tells us of numerous times when Jesus entered into prayer. Prayer is, or should be, a key component of all we do. How often I have noted that the Spirit of the Living God, the Spirit of the Risen Christ is always with us, walking beside us, leading us, guiding us, supporting us. But how often we forget or totally ignore that holy presence in our lives, and I confess, it happens to clergy as well as lay people. If there is a lesson we can take from Jesus, it's the power of prayer, the need for prayer, the privilege of being able to come to God in prayer. So let us pray. . .

Dear Lord,

As we again pray that you would open our eyes to your holy presence,
and open our ears to hear, once again, your words for us,
we pray for the courage and the strength, and the faith to respond
with love and joy and peace. Amen.

So the disciples are out in this boat. Those of us who have made the trip to Israel have seen a boat from the time of Jesus, and typical Galilean fishing boat. Friends, don't think of a luxury cabin cruiser here. Think rather of an oversized canoe – may 15 feet long, three feet wide, basically flat bottomed, purely functional, and not very comfortable or particularly safe. Now, the Sea of Galilee is much smaller than Lake Erie – only seven miles wide; but it's relatively shallow, and, as such, can kick up some fierce storms with the wind coming down the adjacent mountains and raising some nasty choppy waves.

It's evening – night has fallen; and Jesus tells the disciples, “Get into the boat and go ahead of me to the other side. And the disciples do it. Jesus has issued a call – go to the other side, and the disciples responded. Now I do note that several of the disciples were fishermen, and night fishing was not uncommon; so I

don't want to make too much of this, but the disciples answered the call to head to sea.

Friends, how often do we as individuals and we as a church want to leave our boats tied to the dock. It's nice and safe to leave the boats tied to the dock. There's very little risk if we leave our boats tied to the dock. If a storm comes, we won't get into trouble if our boats are tied to the dock. But we also won't catch any fish with our boats tied to the dock; and we won't get to the other side of the lake to spread the good news if our boats stay tied to the dock. It takes courage, and it takes trusting in the call of Christ to put out to sea in the evening, to go to the other side. It takes courage and it takes faith to answer the call.

So the disciples put out to sea, and when they are well off shore, that wind started to come down the mountains, hitting the little boat head-on; and the waves built. It's a scary time. I've been there. It was 2004, myself and my friend were sailing a much larger boat than the disciples had across the Caribbean from St. Croix to Venezuela when suddenly a squall hit. Within a matter of minutes the winds built from 10 to 50 miles per hour and the waves grew to ten feet. The main sail was ripped to shreds. Then the boat's steering system broke. What do you do? You start by saying a very quick prayer; and you trust that God will guide you, as you trust your skill and training as a sailor – putting the proper emergency procedures into place to save the boat and yourself.

So the disciples are out there. Our Bible says it was early in the morning. The original Greek says it was the fourth watch; that means it was between three and six a.m. It's dark, and they're out there in their oversized canoe. The wind is blowing and the waves are rolling. But they're not alone, because Jesus has come to them – walking on the water, and they were terrified. And Jesus immediately tries to calm their fears. He says, "Take heart, have courage, it is I. Do not be afraid." The second learning point in our story: In the midst of the storm, Jesus says, "Have courage; I am with you; do not be afraid."

If we have the courage to leave the dock, if we have the courage to answer the call, if we have the courage to put out to sea, we are going to hit some storms. Those sudden squalls are going to pop up. As the saying goes, "Into every life, a little rain will fall" and sometime those rain showers turn into torrential storms with 50 MPH winds and 10 foot waves. But always, always hear those words of Jesus, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you."

But then there is Peter. Remember Peter? Peter is the brash, bold one. Peter responds to Jesus calming words: "If it's you order me to come to you?" Jesus says, "Come," and Peter gets out of the boat and starts to walk on the water. Not I'm not sure what we do with this. I can start by telling you, when I found myself in the midst of a storm at sea, I never considered getting out and leaving the boat behind. Here we have Peter who, on one hand says, "If it's you..." but on the

other hand, he has the courage and the faith to get out of the boat and attempt to walk on water. Still, it seems that faith didn't last long. He once again became frightened and he began to sink, and he cried out, "Lord, save me." Next learning point: How often we lose faith, and we panic.

If I had panicked in that squall, I might have forgotten how to steer the boat in an emergency and how to rig a storm sail; and I might not be here today. Peter panicked and he began to sink, but Jesus saved him. Jesus picked him up and put him in the boat and then he stilled the storm.

Friends, all of us will, at times lose faith. No genuine faith is constantly growing 100% of the time. It was a spiritual director that once told me that no faith, if it is genuine, is a steady growth. While we try to keep our faith growing over time, within that growth there will always be these hills and valleys. And perhaps the best news of all is that, in the valleys of our faith, at the times when it is waning, Jesus will pick us up, and put us back into our boats. And then, Jesus will calm the storms of our lives that we may continue our journey in response to his call.

Where is Jesus calling? Where is Jesus calling you? Where is Jesus calling me? Where is Jesus calling this church? I've said before, that I'm truly excited about the work our Long Range Planning Committee is doing – mapping the course for the future of this church. That work is still in progress. While things are starting to take shape, we can't say for certain what that future will look like, just as you and I as individuals can't say for certain what our futures will look like.

(The following paragraph is in response to Bishop Tracy Smith Malone's Facebook post regarding the events in Charlottesville, VA on 8/12/17.) When I replied to the Bishop this morning that this congregation will continue to seek new ways to reach out to the community and to the world to bring justice, righteousness, and peace to all people, I was serious. I'm not sure what those new ways will be. Maybe some of you have ideas; and, if you do, I want to hear them; but I believe that we, as people of God, are called to reach out, to share, to serve, and to love.

There is one thing I can say for certain; and that's that Jesus does not want us to leave our boats tied up at the dock. Jesus does not want us to be afraid to head out into the waters, even though we know that there will be some calm times and there will be some storms. And, when the storms hit, we are called not to panic, but to have faith, for we know even when our faith starts to sag, Jesus is there to pick us up and put us back into our boats, that we may continue on the path that he has planned for us.

Praise be to God for the gift of his Son, a constant presence in our lives to lead us, guide us, and care for us at all times and in all circumstances.

Let us pray. . .

Lord,
Give us the faith;
give us the courage to follow where you lead,
to trust in your holy presence, as we answer your call.
Amen.

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