

10th Sunday After Pentecost

August 9, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: Matthew 14:22-33

²²[Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee], while he dismissed the crowds.²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

+++++

You know, Peter often gets a bad rap from us Christians. We often pick on him for those times in the gospels when he waivers in his faith. Whether it is when Jesus rebukes Peter for forbidding the Lord to die; or the time Peter suggested making tents on the mountaintop during Jesus' transfiguration; or the infamous time when Peter denied Jesus three times; we often shake our heads at Peter, trying to learn from his mistakes. This week's gospel reading is no exception.

I have heard many a sermon from pastors who focus on Peter's fear when he is out on the water, away from the safety of the boat, and he notices the violent winds blowing around him. Many pastors have used this moment to talk about how we need to trust in Jesus and not give into our fears like Peter did. Once again, Peter gets a bad reputation as one who waivers in his faith.

And yet, what a lot of people gloss over is the amount of faith it must have taken Peter to climb out of the boat in the first place. Peter, like the other disciples, know it is impossible for humans to walk on water; yet Peter, after seeing Jesus and hearing Jesus tell them he was not a ghost, asks the Lord to command him to walk on the water. I cannot imagine the amount of trust Peter must have had in Jesus'



Hill Ave Grace
Lutheran Church

divine power that convinced him it was safe to get out of the boat and walk on water that was being violently pushed around by the wind. But Peter did it and was successful at walking on the water for a short time.

It takes a lot of trust and faith to do something that is out of our comfort zones, even when it is at the command of Jesus. I remember, back in the summer of 2009, when I was doing my clinical pastoral education at the University of Illinois at Chicago medical center, having to visit a patient who had a rotting skin disease. The minute I walked into the room, the smell that hit my nostrils was absolutely rancid. I wanted nothing more than to leave and never return, yet this patient had asked to be visited by a chaplain. I was uncomfortable the whole time as the smell made me sick to my stomach; however, this patient needed to confess some things. This patient needed someone to listen, and this patient needed someone to pray with them. Since I was God's physical representative of love to this person, even though every instinct in my body told me to get out of their room, I stayed and listened and prayed. It took a lot of trust in the Lord, but it was clear that the patient really appreciated my pastoral care, which reminded them that God was with them.

Part of following Jesus is learning how to love those who we would rather not be around. After all, Jesus spent most of his time with the "undesirables" of society. Jesus chose to eat with them, touch them to heal them, and be in their presence. And to be completely honest, it takes a lot of faith and trust in Jesus to do this. There is a fear in loving the stranger, for how do we know the stranger will not harm us, or steal from us, or take advantage of us in some way? How do we know the stranger is sane? How do we know what kind of sins the stranger has committed in the past? All of these things can make us fear the stranger, which can make it more difficult to love them. Fear, after all, is the biggest tool that sin and death use against us to turn us away from God. Sin and death know that fear is a powerful means of control that can cause us to abandon our morals, our mercy, and our compassion.

And yet, if we do not take leaps of faith, if we do not get out of the boat, how will we experience the saving power of Jesus? How will others experience the saving power of Jesus? I truly wonder what was going through the minds of the other disciples as they watched Peter walk on water, something that should have been impossible. I believe there is a reason that, after Jesus and Peter got back into the boat, all the disciples bowed down and worshipped Jesus as God's true son. However, if Peter had not gotten out of the boat, would they still have made the same confession?

There are a couple of things that we as Christians can learn from our gospel reading today. Sometimes living out our Christian faith in daily life asks us to get out of the boat, out of our comfort zones, in order to follow the command of Jesus—to love neighbors and strangers. And the good news is that, even when stepping out of our comfort zones fills us with fear, Jesus is right there in the midst of the storm to rescue us from drowning in our fear. And, as we continually experience the saving power of Jesus, our trust and faith build and build so that it becomes more comfortable to step out of the boat, knowing that Jesus is present with us on the treacherous waters.



The other thing we can learn from this story is that, when we do step out of our comfort zones, when we are willing to walk on the treacherous waters at Jesus' command, it has the power to inspire others. It has the power to show them the saving power of Jesus. Whether we like it or not, being Christian means that our actions and our words reflect Jesus. We are the physical representatives of God's love to others in this world. This means that what we do reflects how people understand God's love. That is an awesome responsibility that can cause some fear and trembling.

However, being willing to step out of our comfort zones and love those different from us, those that society would rather cast aside, has the ability to open hearts to experience the amazing love of Jesus; it has the ability to save lives. When we are willing to love without condition it will show others the saving power of Jesus, and it will transform them to become disciples. In doing so, the good news of God's love will continue to spread and spread throughout the world, which will continue to help God bring about the kingdom.

This is the mission of being Christian, of being the church in this day and age. Peter has shown us the way; and, while we too may become afraid as we become aware of the stormy winds that surround us, Jesus will be there with us to redeem us and increase our faith so that we won't be so afraid to get out of the boat. So, how will you get out of the boat and follow Jesus?

Amen.

