

Pastor's Message – 8/13/23  
Matthew 14:22-33

At this point in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is in need of some alone time for spiritual renewal. He has just heard the news; His cousin, John the Baptizer, has been killed by Herod and Jesus has not yet managed to take a break in order to deal with his own need to grieve the loss of his friend and cousin. Matthew tells us that Jesus has dismissed the crowds, sent the disciples on ahead in a boat, and went up on a mountain alone to spend some time in prayer and reflection.

Unfortunately, just as quickly as His break had come it came to a screeching halt, because in his absence his disciples got themselves into a bit of a mess. The small craft they had taken to cross the Sea of Galilee had gotten caught up in a terrible storm, and, despite being fishermen, they apparently were not able to navigate themselves out of harm's way.

In the middle of this crisis they spot Jesus - walking towards them on the water. Frightened and stunned, they imagined they were seeing things.

The story today from Matthew reminds me of something I found humorous from a Tour de France bicycle race. Every year, the race organizers schedule some grueling uphill parts of the course. One of the riders remarked that at one point he was riding so slow that his GPS thought he was walking. So slow was the disciples' progress that Jesus was able to catch them in the early hours of the morning by walking out toward them on the water.

Our story today is often used as a diss on Peter. Some preachers latch onto Jesus' comment, "You have so little faith," Jesus said. "Why did you doubt me?" But, did you notice, that Peter was the only one out of the twelve that actually got out of the boat? If Peter had not actually stepped out of the boat, his pronouncement of faith would be open to question. Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly labels such faith as cheap: cheap grace, cheap faith. Whether Peter sank or walked in the waves isn't important. When Jesus invited him to come, he went, and that is faith.

The disciples, when they first spot Jesus approaching, are terrified. They think Jesus to be some sort of apparition, perhaps a demonic spirit. They cannot conceive they are seeing a flesh and blood human. They need proof, not just verbal reassurances, that the apparition is who he claims to be. Peter spells out the conditions. He's the only one with the chutzpah to trust Jesus.

There's a story about an acrobat who used to travel with a small circus to the villages and towns throughout the countryside. This guy walked the high wire, and so he would ask, "Do you think I can walk across the wire with a ball on my head?" Everybody says, "Yes, yes" and he does it. "Do you think I can push a wheelbarrow across the high wire?" "Yes, yes!" The cheering is growing louder and louder. So he says, "Okay, who's going to get in the wheelbarrow?"

Peter has the faith to say, “Jesus, I’m willing to put *my* life on the line here. I’m willing to take a step of faith.” Even though he doesn’t do it perfectly, he’s willing to try. He would be the guy who would say, “I’ll get in the wheelbarrow.” Maybe you’re willing to try? Maybe you’re not and, twenty years later, you may still be saying to yourself, “I missed my chance!”

There are at least three parts that we can focus on in Matthew’s story today. We could focus on Peter and, in spite of his “littlefaith,” he still gets out of the boat. We could focus on the trust to step out into the water.

We could focus on “going on after sinking.” People are generally aware of where they’re sinking in their lives. Often, others are, too. Here is an opportunity for prayer with a simple response: “Save me, Jesus!” And Jesus does.

Let’s take a few moments to focus on the wavering. People know what they say makes them waver when Jesus calls. It’s pretty obvious, no deep reflection required. The disciples see Jesus, he tells Peter to step out of the boat. Not only is Jesus’ appearance frightening, but His invitation to Peter is also frightening. Jesus sometimes frightens us just by who He is – just by appearing in our lives. Sometimes He frightens us by what He asks of us. What are some of the things that frighten you about Jesus?

Why does Jesus even do what He does here? To impress and astound? Or to teach them something very profound? It’s to teach them. This story of walking on the water communicates, as no other set of statements could, the risks and fears involved in the life of faith.

Faith is a risky business. We can easily forget that as we put on nice clothes and come to church on a lovely summer morning. Did any of us risk a thing in choosing to come to worship this morning -- unless it was hitting a deer on the way over, or maybe not finding your usual parking place?

But that's not how it always is in the life of faith. We all know there are times of personal challenge when faith doesn't come easy -- when there's struggle or pain, when every possible choice threatens unhappiness, when the valley of the shadow of death (whatever that phrase may mean for us) is all too near. In such dreadful moments, the choice between faith and no-faith looms in all its stark simplicity. A part of us fears it will make no difference, ultimately, which option we choose.

Faith, by its very nature, is a risky business; but, as the playwright Neil Simon has written, "If no one ever took risks, Michelangelo would have painted the Sistine floor." Our first response, in tough times, is often to turn inward, looking within ourselves for strength. We may be surprised how deep and enduring are the resources we discover there.

Yet, the time will come when our own inner reserves are not sufficient. Then, it's decision time: time to realize firsthand the truth learned by one Christian who reflects: "When you come to the edge of all the light you know, and are about to step off into the darkness of the unknown, faith is knowing one of two things will happen: there will be something solid to stand on or you will be taught how to fly."

When Peter steps out of that boat onto the open water, there's one thing he quickly realizes (if, indeed, he's not thought it already): He does not have within himself the power to do the thing he has set out to do. Peter can't walk on water; he knows it. Every voice of reason within him is crying out, "No! This is impossible." But, step out, he does. He steps out because, at that very moment, he is looking into the eyes of his master and reaching for his hand, and those eyes and that hand tell him he can do it. And, so he can -- at least for a moment, at least until he breaks eye contact. For then, as Matthew tells it, in a marvel of understatement, Peter "notices the strong wind." He gets distracted from the one who gives him strength. He begins to sink -- and then it's only the grip of Jesus' hand upon his wrist that holds him up.

Jesus frightens the disciples when he walks toward them on the stormy sea. He tells them not to be afraid. Peter walks toward him and sinks, only to be lifted by Jesus. I can imagine Peter leaping into Jesus' arms and clinging to him for dear life.

Something has always impressed me. Babies can sleep anywhere. Have you ever noticed how willingly a sleepy baby snuggles in her mother's arms? She finds a comfortable, cuddly position, and goes to sleep contentedly in a very short time. She's not bothered by the television, the magazine, the glaring lights, not even by her mother's conversations with other members of the family. And when her mother gets up, that little one may stay in her deep sleep. She might wiggle a little to find just the right position. She might turn her head or stretch her little legs. But the little baby continues to sleep soundly even as her mother gets up from the chair to carry her to the crib. This little one trusts her mother's loving arms. She does not doubt her ability to care for her in any situation. She does not worry that she will be dropped, nor is she frightened if the routine changes slightly. In fact, fear, worry, and doubt do not even cross her mind. After all, she is in her mother's loving arms. Her mother has always cared for her tenderly, and the baby believes she always will.

Peter trusted Jesus with his life. I hope you noticed that Peter had gotten close enough to Jesus so that Jesus only had to reach out his hand to pull him back out of the water. In other words, *Peter had almost made it all the way to Jesus*. He was nearly there when he suddenly lost heart. Peter did walk on the water. He walked where there was no ground he could see or feel. As long as he kept focus on Jesus, he kept walking.

Faith is not some virtue we practice. It is a gift we are given by God, through Jesus. We do not generate it from within, but we do need to claim the gift. We do need to respond to Jesus' invitation. We do need to leave the safety and familiarity of the boat.

If we're going to walk on water, the only way to start is by getting our feet wet.

Babe Ruth, one of the greatest sluggers in baseball history, once said: "I swing as hard as I can, and I try to swing right through the ball. The harder you grip the bat, the more you can swing it through the ball, and the farther the ball will go. I

swing big, with everything I've got. I hit big or I miss big. I like to live as big as I can." Ruth had 1330 strikeouts in his illustrious big league career, but he led baseball for many years as its home run king with 714 round-trippers, until falling to third place in the last three decades.

"I hit big or miss big" is an incredible line. Peter, like the Babe, went "big." Did he hit a homer and find absolute success? No, he didn't. He did, though, walk on water. Who else can make that claim?

If you're going to be a home run king, you should swing big. If you're going to walk on water, you must get out of the boat.

I like to think of myself as a vision-caster, I'm better at it than I used to be, but I don't think I'm still very good at that. I'm probably better at following a recipe than making one up. But I do think that we have to have both types of people in a church: those folks who know how to dream – the idealistic types and also the people in the church who think it's their responsibility to keep the dreamers "realistic" or whatever. My experience has been that I, or we, may not always be able to fulfill the dream completely, but because we try, we end up doing more than we would have done had the dream never been there.

We have to balance the dreamer with the pragmatism of a Finance Committee Chair, and everybody has to work together. So the walking on water story could be a good paradigm for a church that needs to do some things it doesn't know it can do.

If we're going to be a successful church, we have to swing big. The church of today will not be the church of tomorrow. It's a new world. We've got a long ways to go, and the winds of change and turbulent waters of the postmodern shift are tossing us all about. It is no wonder so many congregations are afraid for their futures! It is no wonder denominational leaders are yelling at each other across lines of theological difference! We are like those disciples on the boat. We are scared for our very lives. Our boat may seem like it is sinking and for some reason, we have lost our faith that Jesus is still out there, and he is not going to abandon us and leave us alone to sink or swim.

Making these shifts is going to require great bravery: bravery on the scale of Peter. It is not going to be easy to let go of the methods that we have relied on for so long. It is not going to be easy to trust that Jesus is really standing there, holding out his hand and encouraging us to walk into this completely unknown and uncharted way of being in mission.

But we have to do it. We have to step out of the safety of what we have known and trusted. We have to stop depending on ourselves. We have to have faith to take big risks and radically trust in Jesus. We've got to get out of the boat.