

Proper 14A 2017 sermon

August 13, 2017

Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

In today's Gospel, Peter is acting his usual impetuous self. How foolish can he be, thinking that **he** could walk on water? He thought that he could do what Jesus does, but he ended up, quite literally, over his head.

That's the way I *used* to understand this passage. But I now see that there is little support in our Gospel text itself for this interpretation. For nowhere does Jesus *scold* Peter for his request, and when Peter sinks, Jesus doesn't say, "I told you so!" or "See what happens when you think you can do what only I can do?" On the contrary: Jesus is very *open* to Peter's request, and he seems to imply that the problem is not Peter's arrogance or presumption, but rather his little faith – which is a very *different* thing altogether.

As our Gospel story begins, Jesus feels the need to go off by himself to pray, so he sends his disciples in a boat to go across the Sea of Galilee ahead of him. They toil all night in the boat, and Matthew tells us "the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them." Then, early in the morning they see Jesus coming to them on the water and think him to be a ghost. Battered by frightening wind and waves and now haunted by a ghost – you can only imagine the disciples' terror! Seeing their fear, Jesus immediately calls to them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And Peter answers, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Note that Peter does **not** ask to *walk on the water*; he asks to be given the grace to *come to Jesus* on the water. I believe that in narrating the story the way he does, Matthew is telling us that Peter wants to be enabled to come to Jesus in the

very **midst** of the fears, tumults, tempests, dangers and storms of life. It is *not* a wrong-headed, egotistical, miracle-seeking request Peter makes. Rather, Peter intuits that the solution to his abject fear is to draw near to Jesus, God's Incarnate Presence, trusting that God is *always* there in the very midst of the chaos and terror. Jesus immediately grants Peter's request, for Jesus *always* invites us, encourages us, yearns for us to come to him amidst the storms of our lives. And so Jesus speaks that one little word of invitation which he speaks to so many people throughout the Gospels: "Come." "Come to me," he tells Peter, in effect. "Enter into the spirit of God, the mind of Christ which triumphs over fear and terror."

And so we see that this story is *not* about physically walking on water at all! Rather, Jesus is inviting Peter – and us! – to **come** to him in the *midst* of the fears and tempests of life, to trust that God will sustain us through the storms if we will draw near to God. Jesus calls Peter to a *real* faith in the *real* presence of our ever-present God. Walking out into the chaos and tumult of life with firm faith in God's presence is not foolishness; it is *exactly* what God **wants** us to do: to enter into the empowering spirit of Christ, and to *live in* that spirit as we travel through the storms of life.

And note that in our Gospel it *works* for Peter – at least at first! Peter **does** take some steps toward Jesus on the waves – he does step out in faith! Fr. John Shea writes: "Initially, with his eyes on Jesus, [Peter] is a fearless walker of the waves. But then his consciousness shifts from Jesus to the strong winds. As the strength of the resisting winds fills his mind, it also captures his emotions and he becomes frightened... His doubting came when he allowed what *threatened* him to capture his mind and heart more completely than what **calmed** him. His inner focus on the reality of Jesus was replaced by an outer preoccupation with the wind." (*On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press 2004, pp. 248-249)

His inner focus on the reality of Jesus was replaced by an outer preoccupation with the wind.

So, where does *your* inner focus reside? In the steadfast presence of God, who comes to us in the midst of life's storms? Or is your inner focus on God and God's kingdom constantly swamped by fear and anxiety at all the turmoils which beset your life and our world? Where do you fix your consciousness? To what or to whom do you trust your body, mind, and soul? In what state do you live most of the time – in fear, or trust?

I say "most of the time" because our lives typically ebb and flow between, on the one hand, anxiety about the storms of our lives, and on the other hand, trust in God and the inherent goodness of God's world. But here's the thing: you and I are not helpless **victims** of this ebb and flow, tossed about like bobbers on the surface of the sea, being swept in and out by the tide, powerless to do anything about it! We can train our focus, our consciousness, to abide in God, to have the

mind of Christ. Fr. Shea notes that “Peter... walks on the water and then sinks because he is learning the path of **confronting** what threatens life *while* working with his own fear... This is the adventure in faith, trying to stay **so** focused on God’s enabling presence that the resistant winds do not defeat us.” (*ibid.*, pp. 250-251)

My friends, this focus on God’s enabling presence can be trained – it’s what we call spiritual formation, or developing the mind of Christ, or learning to live in the kingdom of God. But our formation in the mind of Christ and in the kingdom of God **must** be intentional and deliberate, or we will be formed by default in the mind and kingdom of our secular society which surrounds us. If in the Real Estate world it’s all about location, location, location, in the spiritual world it’s all about formation, formation, formation. C.S. Lewis said, “Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.” (*Mere Christianity*) And how are we formed into “little Christs?” In the same way we are formed into accomplished athletes or musicians: by practice, practice, practice.

Coming here to worship each week as the Body of Christ is one such spiritual practice. Listening to Scripture and sermon, singing hymns together, praying together, exchanging the Peace of the Lord which passes understanding, offering up symbols of our lives, receiving the presence of Christ in bread and wine, welcoming newcomers, giving to the needs of others in our Second Sunday offering, fellowshiping at Coffee Hour with fellow members of Christ’s body... These Sunday rituals can, if we allow God to work through them, train us in the kingdom of God and form us in the mind of Christ. But an hour or two on Sunday mornings is not enough to overcome the overpowering influence of our society and its values the rest of the week.

To address this fact, our Christian Formation Committee met on Thursday to plan for opportunities here at Christ Church for formation into Christ. For children, we offer Sunday School, Youth Group, Confirmation, and Summer Camp; for Adults we offer Adult Forum, *The Faith-Seeking Journey*, our Centering Prayer groups, Men 4 Him, and the spiritual programming of St. Gabriel’s Guild. I strongly encourage you to take advantage of these opportunities for spiritual formation! There are also some wonderful books in our parish library to help in your spiritual formation! Ask me or our librarian pb Walsh for a suggestion!

Practicing putting the love of God into action by volunteering for Laundry Love or CASA or Loaves and Fishes or Mercy Today or some other outreach organization can also form us in the mind and compassion of Christ.

And as I mentioned in my sermon last week, it is difficult to be formed in the mind of Christ and the Kingdom of God without a **daily** practice of prayer during which we become open and vulnerable to the Presence of God. In today’s Gospel story, we see one of the *many* times in the Gospels that Jesus **himself** felt the need

to go off alone and pray. If *Jesus* needed to pray regularly, how much *more* do you and I? Several of us – myself, Linda, Mike, pb, Bryan, and others – would be happy to help you establish such a daily prayer practice.

I began this sermon by pointing out that in today's Gospel Jesus invites Peter to come to him in the midst of a storm by walking on the water, just as Jesus is doing. And I think that, in the end, that is the message of this Gospel for us. Not that we should walk on the water (that's not why Jesus came, after all), but that we should do those things which Jesus **did** come to do: heal the sick, minister to the outcast and marginalized, feed the hungry, forgive even those who have deeply hurt us. For as C.S. Lewis said, the whole purpose of becoming a Christian is to become a little Christ. And we only become little Christs as we are formed in the mind and likeness of Christ through practice, practice, practice.

AMEN