

Pentecost 10 Sermon
Grace in the Midst of Doubt
August 13, 2017

Matthew 14: 22-33

[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. 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 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."

This text has essentially three parts to it, all deserving some commentary due to their relevance for our perspective on the spiritual life of Christians. The story follows the account of Jesus having just fed 5000 people, not counting women and children. It was a patriarchal society, and so it was not considered necessary to include the women and children in the count. However, one can at least guess that this would have doubled the number of people who were actually fed. There is no limit on God's grace, God's love, or God's ability to provide. Neither is there any limit on God's desire to do so.

In the first section of this text, Jesus sends his disciples off in a boat, presumably with plans to meet up with them on the other side. He needs time alone to pray. But what does this really mean? Is he particularly worried about something such that he feels the need to pray about it? There is no indication of that. The text clearly implies that he simply desires time alone with God. So what does he hope to accomplish by this? If he doesn't have a specific concern, or if he isn't anxious as he was in the Garden of Gethsemane, what, one might ask, is the purpose of his prayer time?

This is not a superfluous question. Prayer is one of what I might call the four pillars of the Christian life: a) hearing the gospel, b) participating in the sacraments, c) service to those in need, and d) prayer. These are the ways in which our relationship with God is strengthened and nourished. Were we to ignore these things, even if we say we believe in God, we would for all practical purposes be atheists.

Prayer is something we often limit to specific times, such as before meals, or when we are anxious and afraid. When a loved one or we ourselves are going through a crisis of some kind, we desire prayer. But when everything is peachy keen, the idea of engaging in prayer scarcely occurs to us.

This is very unfortunate. For above all things, prayer is communion with God. When we engage in prayer for the sake of being in the presence of God absent any distractions that take our minds and hearts elsewhere such as the cares of everyday life; and when we open our hearts and ask for God's love and grace to enter our hearts and touch us deep within, he responds with the gift of his Holy Spirit. This gift has the power to clear our conscience, to give us strength and energy, to breathe new life into our souls. In short, we commune with God in order to receive the gifts of God. Making a habit of this is very important because this is one essential way in which the Kingdom of God breaks into our lives in the present; God gives us faith, hope, and love—the gifts of the Spirit.

This is why Jesus ascends the mountain, the traditional place wherein a person has an encounter with God, and prays. He spends every waking hour filling the needs of all those lost and brokenhearted people, lifting them up through the gift of God's grace. But Jesus is also human. He needs time to commune or have fellowship with God. We would do well to learn from him in this regard. Our time on this planet is very limited, and we need to avail ourselves of the presence of God on a regular basis lest we spend all our precious time on things that are of only secondary importance, and then when trouble comes, we end up wondering, "Where is God?" The fact is, he never left. Rather, like the prodigal, we left him.

On the second part of this text, a storm arises and the disciples lose control of the boat. It is dark, and they have no idea where they are. All they know is that they are at the mercy of a merciless storm, and their lives are therefore in danger.

A few weeks ago Kirsten, a friend of ours, and I decided to go canoeing down the Russian River in Sonoma County. The scenery is beautiful. The river is full. And we were assured that the nine-mile route down the river was largely peaceful and placid--in other words, nothing dangerous where the current may be too rapid to easily maneuver through.

We were in the water for less than five minutes when we encountered an area where there were a lot of large rocks and the current was rapid. I'm not sure how it happened, but before I knew it, I ended up in the water and was being carried down the river, trying to avoid the rocks on either side. After that, I volunteered to sit in the middle of the canoe while Kirsten steered and our friend paddled.

This is what the disciples were going through only it was much worse. It symbolizes those times in life when unexpected and potentially dangerous influences take control, and you have no idea where you are going or where you might end up. It's like being in the hospital completely at the mercy of the staff. It's like being audited by the IRS. It's like being in a car and losing control on a sheet of ice. It's like going through one of

those times in life when everything goes wrong and regaining control is out of the question. When this happens, it's easy to lose perspective. In fact, the fear aroused by control can become so overwhelming that you start to actually expect things to get even worse.

When the disciples see Jesus coming to them on the water, fear has overtaken them to the point that they don't see Jesus. They see a ghost—a thing that is purely the product of a fear-driven imagination. It's not because he's walking on water that they suppose him to be a ghost. They know what he looks like. So, while it was certainly not expected that they would see him walking on water, nevertheless, that he is taken to be a threatening and garish apparition is purely a matter of seeing things through the prism of fear.

Fear most certainly does this to us. How we feel at a particular time is always going to affect how we perceive things. For example, when I'm stressed or fearful of something, even the little everyday annoyances can cause an angry response. On the other hand, when I feel just fine, I simply deal with them in a calm and reasonable way. The point here is to highlight the fact that fear can cause distorted perceptions, and thereby create even more fear and agitation such that it feeds on itself. As we all know, it's not possible to control everything that happens to us in this life. When you think about it, we are extremely vulnerable in so many ways—even when we just drive down the block with the possibility of some drunk hitting us head-on—that if we dwelt on it too much, it would paralyze us. The disciples were paralyzed with fear to the point that their Lord and master was seen to be a ghost!

As is his way, Jesus speaks words of comfort to allay their fears. One thing that's clear about Jesus throughout his whole life: he never gives in to fear. He lives in perfect faith in God, and God is always in control. To Jesus, fear is not a problem because even though he was in no way always in control of what might happen—with the exception of his death and resurrection—nevertheless, he always lived in faith that his Father would provide. “Look at the lilies. Look at the birds. They are not anxious about what they will wear or eat and yet your heavenly Father provides. Be like them. When we seek first the Kingdom of God, all these other concerns recede into the background.”

Also, as usual, Peter, in the third section of this text, is the one who tends to act before he thinks and is always the first one to take risks, decides to ask Jesus if he also might walk on the water. In other words, Peter wants to experience what it's like to rise above his fear and thereby deal with the storm by walking right through it, as if the water had no power to overwhelm him. Peter is like the person who decides, “While I can't control whether or not I will end up in a storm, I can control how I react to it, and whether or not it tears me apart internally. He embodies the saying that while we can't control the world around us, we can control how we react to it. Bad things, threatening things, illnesses, the death of loved ones, economic recessions, accidents—whatever—we will have to live through these in this broken world, a world that has been passing away ever since it's fall from grace. But we don't have to let these disasters break our spirits such that we become little more than victims over and over again, falling into

self-pity and losing all our strength. Such folks end up finding comfort only in the pity that others express for them, and this is what they seek out: people who will say, “poor you” over and over again. While being able to show empathy and lend a helping hand is part of what it means to love your neighbor, making a person dependent on that to the point where they cannot help themselves is not a virtue.

Peter is certainly not like this. And in this particular case, the source of his confidence does not reside in himself. It resides in Jesus. “Command me to come to you.,” he says. In other words, Peter knows that his ability to rise above his fear resides in his faith. He has faith that Jesus can make this happen. He doesn’t look for confidence in himself. This is not positive thinking, or possibility thinking, or anything he conjures up by his own strength and power. This is trust in Jesus Christ--that Jesus can create in him the ability to rise above his fear. So long as he is focused on the presence and grace of Jesus Christ, he can do the impossible. He can shed his fear of being overwhelmed by the storm and demonstrate that rebirth of confidence and of what he believes can happen for him by actually walking on the very water that threatens him.

“Come,” says Jesus who is happy to comply with his request. Jesus is very happy with us when we ask for faith and grace, not only in the midst of trouble, but also at any time. This he desires to give us. He may not want to give us what we sometimes want, such as a miraculous healing, or health, wealth and popularity. These things are just substitutes for the living God. But he is happy to give us faith so that we can walk through the storms of life without having our spirit broken in the process by fear and hopelessness. It may take time as it did for so many people in the biblical story. But as he said elsewhere, faith saves us from all these threats. And that’s why he came...to give us faith in him.

So long as Peter is focused on the presence of Christ, he is fine. He goes for a short stroll on the water. However, as soon as his attention is distracted by the strong wind, his fear returns, and he sinks like a rock. Think about this. The greater threat to our well being in the midst of storms is not the storm itself. It’s how the storm affects us.

Storms don’t have to break our spiritual well being. They don’t have to take away our faith. They don’t have to rob us of hope. They don’t have to cause a broken heart that can’t be healed enough to move on. They don’t have to destroy our lives and take away our ability to experience joy and gratitude. It’s not easy to deal with pain, suffering, loss, and general chaos. It’s not easy finding a pathway through it, and once we do, move moving on to a better future with the ability to leave all that trouble behind. And it’s often tempting to just give in to it, and feel as if life has victimized us.

Faith, however, does not obsess over or focus on the distress. It doesn’t deny it. It acknowledges it. But it doesn’t allow it to win because faith is centered on Jesus Christ. He is God’s gift of victory over these things to us. He feeds our hearts and minds with his love. He frees us with his forgiveness. He inspires strength. He gives us new life, and he is our hope—our refuge in any kind of trouble.

In other words, Christ is present in faith. And through his unchangeable presence, our hearts are made strong, healthy, and capable of weathering the storms of life.

This story ends with another act of amazing grace. As often happens, because our faith is not always as strong as we need it to be, and because we sometimes face challenges that were not prepared to handle very well, being human and with all that goes with that, sometimes weak, flawed, and unable to keep our perspective so that we can see things clearly, we fail and sink. Peter sank when the storm overwhelmed his faith.

Thanks be to God that he is gracious, loving, forgiving, and unchanging in his faithfulness. For when Peter sank, Jesus reached out his hand and pulled him up, after which he calmed the storm. The threat had passed. Peace and calm returned, and no one was the worse for it. However, as usual for Jesus, this was a teaching moment. Because the loving thing to do in cases like this is to be honest, he said, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

Sometimes we do doubt. Sometimes we lose heart and say or do things that indicate we are of little faith. This, unfortunately, can do great harm at times. For when others may be counting on us during troubled times, and we say things that create fear or cause doubt, we are not acting in ways that are reflective of the presence of Christ. When we are facing storms together, as the disciples did here, our ability to trust in Jesus Christ is not only essential for ourselves as individuals. It is essential for those around us. Falling into fear and doubt, expressing negativity and "woe is me"—that will affect others in a negative way. Demonstrating the peace of God in a situation that can cause fear inspires hope and confidence.

Jesus does not allow Peter to sink. He pulls him out and uses the incident as a time for growth in faith. Faith is most certainly a journey. It grows stronger along the way. Keep your eyes of faith on the presence of Christ and he will see us through any and all challenges this world can dish out.