

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 14

Year A

Our Faith inside the Boat

[RCL:] Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105, 1-6, 16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

Sometimes today's gospel lesson is interpreted along the lines of the title of a book by John Ortberg, "If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get out of the Boat." The interpretation goes like this: Peter had the right idea when he got out of the boat, quite literally stepping out in faith. Peter, like all of us, is invited to step out into the storms of life where Jesus calls us to take courage, leave the safety of the boat, and come to him. If we have enough faith in Jesus and keep our focus firmly on him, we will not sink, despite the wind and the waves. If only Peter had not become distracted. When he kept his eyes on Jesus, he could walk on water. When he got anxious and sidetracked from keeping his focus on Jesus, Peter, whose name means "rock," went down like a stone. Jesus wants us to be bold in our faith. Jesus wants us to walk on water, dream big, take risks in our lives. And if we can just be faithful enough, we will succeed.

Walking on water has come to be synonymous, even outside the church, with the idea of stepping out in boldness, taking a risk. If you do an Internet search on "walk on water," you'll get links to business consulting firms, fashion companies, science projects – all of them proponents of going the extra mile (another biblical phrase that's gone mainstream). It has become another phrase along the lines of "thinking outside the box," "The early bird catches the worm," and "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

No doubt Jesus wants us to take risks for the sake of the gospel. No doubt Jesus wants us to keep our eyes focused on him and his mission. No doubt Jesus wants us to have the gift of faith. He's the one who reminded his followers, in Matthew 19:26, "With God, all things are possible." He's the one who told some fishermen to leave everything to follow him. He's the one who tells us to take up our cross, to lose our lives for his sake, that if we have faith even the size of a mustard seed, we could say to that mountain, get up and move, and it would. When the resurrected Jesus stepped out of the tomb that first Easter morning, he really outdid himself in thinking "outside of the box," didn't he? No doubt, Jesus wants us to take risks, be bold, do outrageous things for the gospel, step out in faith and follow.

But is that really what Jesus really wants us to hear in this particular gospel lesson? One thing that's true about Matthew's gospel is it's interested in *community*. It's really interested in figuring out what it means to be the church, the body of Christ in the world, the gathering of people who are trying to follow Christ together. Matthew really isn't interested in great heroes of the faith, singular individuals who go above and beyond. If, like Peter, they go swinging their

legs out over the side of the boat, leaving the rest of the disciples behind trying to row and manage in the storm, we're likely to see such an individual take a few steps and then plunge beneath the waves, surely to drown, if not for the grace and love and forgiveness of Jesus who always, always, reaches out to save, even when we get confused and fearful and full of doubt.

So I wonder if when Jesus says to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" the meaning isn't, "Oh, Peter, if only you had more faith," but is, instead, "Oh, Peter, why did you get out of the boat?"

The boat has, from very early days in the Christian community, been a symbol for the Church. And no wonder. Think of a ship, a vessel large enough that it takes a number of people doing diverse things to get it to move. A ship is a great symbol for the church. Moving through the waters on a gorgeous day can be simply glorious. When wind and water and sailors cooperate, the journey is grand. Sometimes, though, life on the ship can get routine. The same chores need doing every day. The wind doesn't always do what the sailors want. A large crew means a variety of people, which means a variety of ideas and personalities. The ship's mission can be jeopardized by those who are tempted to set sail alone, or mutiny, or jump overboard. But any problems on the ship have more to do with the sailors than the Captain – with a capital C, as in "Christ" – because the Captain has provided for the ship. The Captain gives Word and Sacraments, the community of sailors, and even gave them their seaworthy ship to guide them into the ultimate safe harbor. Christians have long treasured this image of the Church as a ship: beautiful, but vulnerable; seaworthy, but subject to storm and winds and waves.

In today's lesson, Jesus makes the disciples, those who would follow him, get into a boat, and head out across the sea. The gospel says, "Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side." Jesus would meet up with them again. First, he was going to take some time by himself to pray.

But a storm blows up, as storms do in our lives, and Jesus doesn't wait for them to get to the other side. He comes to them, walking across the water, the very picture of God that they knew from their scriptures. Psalm 77 says, "When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled. ... Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen." In Job 9:8, God overcomes the powers of chaos, pictured as a stormy sea. It says, "God alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the sea." Jesus would not leave his disciples alone in the boat to perish in the storm, but comes to them, and says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

And then there's Peter. And while we usually just skip right to impetuous, enthusiastic Peter, faithfully thinking outside the box, jumping overboard and pulling off an amazing stunt, if even

just for a moment, what Peter actually does first is say something. He says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” “If it is you ...”

If.

There are only a couple of other times in the whole gospel when someone addresses Jesus with “if,” and they’re not pretty. The devil does it three times to Jesus when he tempts him in the desert, “If you are the Son of God,” make stones into bread, call down special privileges from God, worship me. When Jesus is hanging on the cross, people mock him, calling out, “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” And here, Peter, beautiful, real Peter, joins his voice, “If it is you, Jesus, command me to come to you on the water.”

If.

Jesus doesn’t chide Peter for being afraid. Of course you’re afraid in the midst of a storm. But why did you doubt? Did you really think I wouldn’t come? Did you really think I wouldn’t save you? Did you really think, when I told you to get into the boat and go on ahead, that I would ever, ever leave you alone?

“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Jesus and Peter get into the boat. The wind ceases. “And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly, you are the Son of God.’”

Matthew’s whole gospel ends with the resurrected Jesus appearing to the disciples. The resurrected Christ himself appears where he said he would meet them. And Matthew tells us, “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” Some doubted. Even then. Even with the risen Jesus standing right in front of them. They worshiped. But some doubted.

That’s not where the story ends, though. Even still, in the midst of their worship, even to those who doubt, Jesus gives a command and a promise. The command is this: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” And then he gives them a promise – all of them: “And remember,” says Jesus, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Storms will blow up in all of our lives. But Jesus has not left us alone. The one who calms the storms and makes the winds to cease is still with us. He still has work for us to do. And yes, it will mean stepping out in faith, but not getting out of the boat, not going it alone, not leaving the community of disciples. The purpose of a ship is to set sail, not to stay at the dock.

There are plenty of adventures ahead, and Jesus will bid us follow. And he will say to us, in the midst of any storm, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

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