

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

August 13, 2023 (Proper 14, Year A)
Matthew 14:22-33, Romans 10:5-15

There's a joke about three ministers out fishing together in a small boat. One of them, suddenly realizing that he'd left his tackle box in the cabin, stepped out of the boat, and walked on the water over to shore. Just then, the second one said he'd forgotten his faithful fishing hat on the front seat of the car. He too stepped out of the boat and walked on the water over to shore. When they'd both returned, the third minister who had watched this remarkable demonstration with mouth open and eyes wide, reasoned to himself "My faith is as strong as theirs. I can do that too."

So he stepped out of the boat and promptly sank to the bottom. His two companions dragged him out, but once they got him in the boat, he was determined not to be shown up. He stepped out once more, and immediately sank again. As his friends pulled him out, he sputtered, "My faith is as strong as yours. Why can't I walk on the water?"

The first two looked at each other and one finally said, "We'd better tell him where those rocks are before he drowns himself."

What that minister didn't understand is that this gospel isn't about Jesus trying to IMPRESS anyone; it's about his willingness to overcome any obstacle to reach out to those who need him. The disciples are out on the sea in a boat on a dark and stormy night (sounds like the beginning of a storybook, doesn't it?). The disciples are scared. It's the middle of the night, and out on the water on a cloudy night, it must have been pitch black. The waves are beating against their little boat, and the wind is taking them further and further from shore. They are very much aware that they're alone, that Jesus ISN'T WITH them. But Jesus comes to them, walking on the water, to save them. Jesus comforted them. He said, "Have courage, it's me. Don't be afraid." That's what this story is about.

Now HEARING that, Peter – good old reckless, impetuous, spontaneous Peter – jumps out of the boat and himself starts walking on the water to Jesus. The gospels often paint Peter as an impulsive fool, with shades of yellow cowardliness and green embarrassment to go along with his red temper. But at least here, he was so impressed, so inspired, and emboldened by Jesus that he was willing to take a RISK and do something new, and different, and unheard of, if not downright dangerous and crazy. He wanted to go to JESUS ON the water.

All too often we just sit tight in our little boats, clinging to the gunwales of safety and security; trusting in our small ship of status quo. But coming to Jesus often means boldly stepping out into a NASTY WORLD, where the winds are blowing and the waves are churning. It means taking some risks and doing something new and different and daring.

SO WHAT if we fail? If we're even in the NEIGHBORHOOD of Jesus, falling flat on our face won't harm us.

FaithLESSness—that's what will harm us. When Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church," he didn't mean a church that will never budge. He meant a FAITH like Peter's, a faith that led him OUT of the boat, with his eyes on Jesus.

There's a character in the classic Don Quixote named Pancho Sanchez. Pancho Sanchez hangs in fear from the ledge of a window all night long, too frightened to let go. When morning dawns he discovers his toes are only an inch off the ground.

It's amusing to think of Simon Peter climbing out of the boat trying to imitate his Lord by walking on the water. Then, like a cartoon character, he makes the mistake of looking down. "What in the world am I doing?" he asked himself, and suddenly he begins to sink.

How often that happens in life. People are charting a successful course in their business, in their marriage, in their walk with Christ, and then they begin to listen to their FEARS. "What if I fail? What if I can't do it? What if my faith isn't strong enough?" and they begin to slowly sink.

Peter was doing just fine, until he took his eyes OFF Jesus, and looked elsewhere – looked AROUND at the wind and DOWN at the waves. When he took his eyes OFF Jesus, he lost his nerve and started to sink.

Remember the first time YOU rode a bike without training wheels, and your parents ran along behind you, and then took their hand AWAY, so you were sailing down the street without realizing that you were riding all by YOURSELF? I think that's what this walking on water is like. Peter's just pedaling along, and it's going fine until he looks BACK and notices that no one's behind him or, in his case, that the wind was still blowing. One look back. He didn't NEED to. He had it; he had the FEEL of it. But he didn't believe WHAT he was doing; he looked back, and fell over, and cried, "Lord, save me!" And the Lord immediately reached out and grabbed him.

There's an old Peanuts cartoon, where Linus comes running across the beach to Charlie Brown shouting "I can swim, I can swim!"

"Well, I'm glad to hear that Linus, congratulations!" said Charlie Brown.

"Yes sir," Linus says, "If I'm ever aboard an ocean liner and it sinks four feet from shore, I won't have a thing to worry about!"

Isn't that true for most of us? Peter, you and I can go about 4 feet OFF the power of our own faith, but after that, we need to rely on the strong arms and hands of God.

I'll bet every one of us this morning can think of some remarkable water-walkers we have known. We all have watched simple, straight-forward, hard-working men and women, little toddlers and tormented teens, shut-in elders and shut-out homeless, perform acts in their lives that defy the limitations of the world in which they LIVE.

The chemotherapy patient who gets out of bed, puts on clean clothes, and picks up the house, before going for treatment . . . What are they doing but walking on water?

The homeless woman who sleeps in a box, gleans food from dumpsters, but still smiles a greeting and laughs at a joke . . . What is she doing but walking on water?

The single parent, overworked, overwhelmed, over-extended in time, money, and energy, but makes it to soccer games and school plays and checks to see that homework is done . . . What is that harried parent doing but walking on water?

The octogenarian who lives alone, whose family has forgotten him, who counts the postal carrier and the water-meter reader as "company," but still is up and dressed by 8am and sits at the table for all his meals . . . What is he doing but walking on water?

We are called to get OUT of the boat, and GO to Jesus and do what HE'S doing.

I read an account from a hospital chaplain, where one of her assigned units was the neonatal intensive care unit. There she watched babies born 1, 2, 3 months early, struggle for their lives, struggle to eat, to breathe, to gain even an ounce. The mothers there, whether they considered themselves religious or not, suddenly found themselves having to RELY on faith, suddenly found themselves believing in, hoping for, depending on miracles. It was hard for an outsider, even a chaplain, to understand the kind of faith required in this special nursery.

This is what she wrote about it:

At first I would look at some of the tiniest babies, some of the 1 lb. babies, and try to be realistic. To prepare myself for the grief I might experience, I tried to expect the real possibility that the smallest babies might not make it. I hoped for the best, but I tried to balance my hopes with realism, with the reality confronting me, so that I wouldn't be disappointed if a miracle didn't happen, so that I wouldn't be hurt if I DID have to confront sorrow and loss. But the mothers there would tell you that THAT attitude wasn't what was needed there - they would tell you that no matter what the odds, they had to hope for a miracle, with all their heart, with all the faith they could muster. There was nothing practical about their faith, no consideration for realism in what they dreamed of happening. Perhaps this was the kind of faith Jesus was asking of Peter out on the sea that day. Unbounded faith, unrestrained, unmeasured, uncalculated. Perhaps this is the kind of faith Jesus is asking, demanding, expecting of us.

What Paul says in our second reading is true: everyone, whether you're in the boat or out on the sea, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." "But how can they believe in someone they've never heard of." How can people know that Jesus saves all who ask, unless voices out IN the storm of the world are saying it and living it?

And that's what our worship is for too, so that we, like the disciples, out in our OWN STORMS of life, can worship Jesus, saying, "Lord, save us! Truly you are the Son of God."

That's what we do in our worship out on the water, and down at Maria Chapel – we step OUT of our little boat and boldly say, "Truly you are the Son of God." That's what Christians do, and we do it in the midst of the storm. Amen.