

Sermon Proper 14A

Dent Davidson, 13 August 2017

Dear God, be good to us.
The sea is so wide,
and our boat is so small. **Amen.**

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.*

This poem by Rainer Maria Rilke was given to me by my discernment group as I began the process to be ordained to the priesthood, back in 1999. These words have never been far from my heart. The call to go beyond my imagined limits; to endure the good and the bad; the urge just to keep going. It is God saying – I've got you, no matter what!

My group spent a year inviting me out of my comfort zone, pushing & challenging me; asking difficult questions, like:

- Why would you give up music?
- What can you do as a priest that you cannot do as a lay person?
- How would you handle being “under orders” ... Having to answer to the authority of the Church?
 - It was THIS question that haunted me like a ghost on the stormy seas of postulancy ... for ten years. And it ultimately compelled me to take a major risk: to let go of a vocation I strongly felt, and that the church upheld; and remain a lay person, living out an un-ordained priesthood. It's a decision I revisit in my head and heart every single day, sometimes with regret, most often with relief!
- I'm grateful that my mentors made space and opportunity for me to wrestle and strive, and “go to the limit of my longings, and flare up” as Rilke's poem puts it, in order to deepen my own faith and my relationship with God and others: some of it beautiful, some of it, terrifying. Good mentors do this.
-

Reading today's gospel lesson, it's not hard to see Jesus as a mentor. Disciple means student, and these students are with Jesus to LEARN something: about God, about the world, and about themselves.

Just to give us some context for this story, let's do a very quick recap of Matthew, Chapter 14.

There's news of the death of John the Baptist – a gruesome beheading. Jesus' first aim is to get away and be alone. But the crowds follow him and increase in number as he and his students went along.

Towards the end of the day the disciples are kind of irritated by all the people. They grumble, “It's getting late! Make them go home so they can get something to eat.”

Jesus, never one to pass up a good teachable moment, says: “YOU feed them” And bam! We learn how a little bread and a couple of fish feed 5,000.

I picture Jesus sighing and rolling his eyes at the disciples before he takes the bread; blesses God, Breaks it, and gives it to them to distribute. When the eating is done, everyone has had their fill, and there are 12 baskets of leftovers.

Whether it was a magical multiplication, or a miraculous breaking open of hearts to share with others, the grumpy, exhausted disciples, seemed to miss the importance of the feeding. THIS is where our gospel reading picks up today.

And the text is really emphatic: IMMEDIATELY he made them get into the boat and head across the lake. There’s a sense of urgency. I’m compelling you - get into the boat and cross the lake – and they do. Then Jesus dismisses the crowds, and heads up the mountain to be alone with God.

Meanwhile, the disciples have been rowing out across the Sea of Galilee for like 8-9 hours already. They’re exhausted from a very long day’s work, and it seems never ending, as they struggle against the wind and waves.

Suddenly an eerie figure comes towards them, walking on the chaotic sea; and they are terrified.

How many of you had ViewMasters when you were kids? That strange contraption that, when held up to the face, showed 3D pictures? I had discs of cartoons and dinosaurs; and I had some of bible stories. One picture was of a ghostly, glowing Jesus walking across a gloomy, stormy sea towards a boat filled with terrified men. When I think back, the image WAS kind of terrifying. I’m not sure that was the goal of the manufacturers. But when I read this story, it’s the first picture that pops into my head.

The disciples hear Jesus: **“Take heart. It is I. Don’t be afraid.”** His voice alone reassures them. And when we look deeper, we find Jesus showing his ID card: On the chaos of the stormy sea, he’s treading as if HE created it. And the words: “It is I,” are really the divine Name: I AM. Maybe it’s finally beginning to dawn on them just who this Jesus is.

Peter is so impassioned, he asks permission: “If it really IS you, command me to walk out onto the waves.” I imagine Jesus is pleasantly surprised at Peter’s gumption ... maybe a little like, “OK hot stuff, show me whatcha got!”

Well, we know what happens next. He gives it a try, and loses his nerve.

Jesus reaches out immediately and saves him, saying: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” But when I read these words, I hear something other than a rebuke or admonishment. Because I’ve always learned that the opposite of faith isn’t doubt; the opposite of faith is certainty. Eugene Petersen paraphrases it: “Faint heart, what got into you?” I don’t think Jesus is angry or perturbed. I think he’s more like a parent watching a kid on their first bike ride without training wheels: “There you go – you’re doing it – CRASH – that was great, let’s try again!”

When they’re all back in the boat, the storm immediately calms – and the disciples confess: “Truly you are the Son of God.” That’s where our story ends this morning. We miss out on the last 3 verses, which ask the burning question:

Why did Jesus cross the Sea of Galilee?

To get to the other side.

Jesus knew there was work to be done across the lake.

These final verses of chapter 14 tell us that they came to land at Gennesaret, where the sick were brought to Jesus, begging to touch even the fringe of his cloak – and all who touched were healed.

Can you imagine the *faith* it takes to be healed *just* by touching his garments?

Even though Peter's *faith* was little, it's better than no faith at all.
And what does Jesus say about having even a little bit of faith?

How about the *faith* of the disciples who got in and stayed in the boat? It them to confessing Jesus as the Son of God, and prepared them for the next thing.

As a skillful mentor, Jesus called his disciples out beyond themselves – to do more than they ever imagined they could do. Calling them into an adventurous, risky, even terrifying life of faith. And I believe he calls us to the very same thing.

Being the Church isn't just a Sunday activity. It's a life of 24/7 servanthood. Either we are feeding the multitudes, or weathering the storms of our own lives; reaching out to touch and heal those who are suffering; or witnessing to God's presence and power in our life as a congregation, as we take part in a parade later today – showing that we are a people of YES.

All this boat/sea imagery is very apt.

Look up. This is the Nave, from the Latin *Navis* - the church is a ship. We're in a boat, just like those disciples. Our challenge is to cross the stormy, dangerous seas. To take heart, and hear the voice of Jesus calling us to BE the kingdom of God. And he's given us this ship, the Church, to carry out that Mission.

It's been a difficult couple of days in the news. The streets of Charlottesville have been filled with violence, division, and terror. I rewrote this sermon last night. At first I thought I'd take the advice of a FaceBook friend, and just weep for 12 minutes. But then I thought, in the face of this horrible news, how can we announce the GOOD News that Jesus is with us? I'm thankful to our Elizabeth and Shay, on our leadership team here, who helped me rethink and redirect a little.

Theologian Sarah Dylan Breuer writes: "Faith isn't an activity of the brain so much as of the heart ... not in the sense of drumming up some kind of feeling, but of pumping blood to the feet and hands... faith starts with action, with taking a step, with taking a risk."

So, as we tread the streets of Gurnee, let us hold *all* of the people in Charlottesville in our hearts, and pray to God that our feet, right here, are walking the pathway of peace, as today's psalm puts it.

And when the parade is over, let us show the world, in word and in action, each in our own small ways, how mercy and truth meet together; how righteousness and peace kiss one another – leaving no room for prejudice, hatred and bigotry.

As we reach the other shore in our little boat, let us touch the ones who need healing.

Let us stand in the face of division and preach a word of unity.

Let us stand in the face of power and proclaim a word of justice.

Let us stand in the face of terror and unleash a flood of peace.

Let's help all of God's people hear the words of Jesus: Take heart – It is I. I AM – do not be afraid. And let's do it with all the confidence and love we can muster. THAT, dear ones, is one way we get in the boat – one way to make REAL the Reign of Christ, right here, right now.

It is not an article of faith that Jesus is with us, THAT is a certainty! He is as close as the very next breath we take. Shay likes to say that “the only thing we really need to do is exhale.”

One teeny, tiny little bit of faith, as small as a mustard seed, is all we need to follow Jesus’ command to get in the boat, and row together against the wind and waves of those things that damage and divide the Kingdom of God. Let us go beyond the limits of our longing, answering God’s call to live wild, risky, adventurous lives in him.

And while we’re rowing, we can confidently sing:
No storm can shake my inmost calm when to that rock I’m clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?