

GET OUT OF THE BOAT

Our church is at a crossroad. We are, as we all know, in between ministers, and what that means is that everybody in the congregation-everybody, Session members, Deacons, Sunday school teachers, worship leaders, people in our choirs, committee members, kids, and those who sit in the church or who watch on line, are going to have to work a little harder, participate a little more, volunteer their help,to move us forward toward the next step of our church's storied history.

We have many wonderful leaders in this congregation-people who are comfortable putting themselves forward in the leadership roles that are so necessary to any organization. And ***equally*** important, we have a LOT of great followers in this congregation-the people who work diligently and quietly behind the scenes to put plans into action.

Thinking of leaders and followers made me recall a story we used for our Virtual VBS, The I Can Academy, last summer. We had chosen four stories from scripture about people who did things they didn't know, or perhaps even imagine, that they could. I think we went with this theme, because, frankly, we weren't sure that we could actually create a virtual Vacation Bible School in only a matter of weeks.

Our final week's activities were centered around the story found in Matthew's gospel of the disciple Peter walking on water. Do you remember that story? Let me give you a quick recap:

After miraculously feeding the 5,000, Jesus sent his disciples on ahead of him in a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. Several hours later in the night, the disciples encountered a storm that frightened them.

It was then that they witnessed Jesus walking toward them across the surface of the water, and their fear turned to terror because they believed they were seeing a ghost. As recounted in Matthew 14, Jesus told them, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

Peter replied, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water," and Jesus invited Peter to do exactly that. Peter jumped out of the boat and began walking on the water toward Jesus, but the moment he took his eyes off of Jesus, Peter saw nothing but the wind and waves, and he started to sink.

Peter cried out to the Lord, and Jesus immediately reached out his hand to catch him. As Jesus and Peter climbed into the boat together, the storm ceased. After witnessing this miracle, the disciples worshiped Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

When I was researching the story for the week, I came across a meditation by Elizabeth Egbert, who writes a wonderful blog called Scripture Pancakes. If you haven't heard of her or read her meditations, I highly recommend them.

The title intrigued me, largely because it challenged me to look at an aspect of the story that frankly, had never even occurred to me. Ms. Egbert wrote, "Peter Walked on Water, But Why

Didn't the Other 11 Apostles as well?" I'd like to share some of her thoughts with you this morning.

Ms. Egbert starts by saying, Peter often gets a bad rap. Often, the one part of the story that we remember about Peter is that he sank. He failed. But did he fail? Peter remains the only mortal man to have ever walked on water, but there were 11 other people on the boat.

Why didn't **they** get out? They missed the opportunity of a lifetime because they gave in to fear. Reason and logic overcame faith. But Peter, a fisherman, a man who knew more than anyone that a man doesn't walk on water was eager to jump out and DO what the Savior doing.

Was this experience a great failure? Ms. Egbert doesn't think so! She suggested that we instead consider it a great success. Peter did, in fact, learn many priceless lessons. Peter learned that he could walk on water! When we follow the Savior and do what He asks of us, we can do things we never even dreamed were possible.

Christ was showing Peter the miraculous things he could do through faith! What a confidence booster! Peter must have thought, "Wow! If I can walk on water, is there anything, with Christ's help, that I can't do?" The verse from the 4th chapter of Philippians comes to mind here: "I can do ALL things, through Christ who gives me strength."

How many times do you think Peter thought of that experience as he was symbolically asked to walk on water during his ministry-to do things that must have seemed impossible.

While Peter's eyes were fixed upon the Lord, the wind might toss his hair and the spray might drench his robes, but all was well.

Only when with wavering faith he removed his glance from the Master to look at the furious waves and the black gulf beneath him, only then did he begin to sink.....

Howard Hunter wrote in his book "The Beacon in the Harbor of Peace": it is my first belief that if an individual people, as families, communities, and nations, we could, like Peter, fix our eyes on Jesus, we too might walk triumphantly over the swelling waves of disbelief and remain unterrified amid the rising winds of doubt.

But if we turn away our eyes from him in whom we must believe, as it is so **easy** to do and the world is so much **tempted** to do, if we look to the power and fury of those terrible and **destructive** elements around us rather than to him who can help and save us, then we shall inevitably sink in a sea of conflict and sorrow and despair.

Hunter continued, "At such times when we feel the floods are threatening to drown us and the deep is going to swallow up the tossed vessel of our faith, I pray we may always hear amid

the storm and the darkness that sweet utterance of the Savior of the world: “Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.”

Remember, as soon as Peter began to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” And immediately, Jesus stretched forth his hand and caught him.” Ms. Egbert noted that Jesus reached out his hand....immediately. He didn’t put his hands on His hips and say “Peter, it’s your own fault you’re sinking. Go swim a few laps, and think about what you’ve done. Then maybe, just maybe, I’ll think about forgiving and helping you...”

Peter learned that even when it was due to his own poor choice that he was sinking, the Savior stood ready to save him as soon as He asked.

The other 11 apostles avoided “failure”, but as Denis Waitley once said, “Failure is something we can avoid only by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing.” I saw this quote that spoke to me: “Doubt kills more dreams than failure ever will.”

You know, all the participants of this story: Jesus, Peter, and the 11 who stayed behind are such important parts of this lesson for us all. As we contemplate the future of our dearly loved church AND church family, we have the opportunity to be a leader, like Peter, or a follower, like the other 11.

Although the other 11 remained in the boat, I’d like to think that they also learned a number of important lessons that evening, and their faith grew monumentally. They too went on

to help spread the message of Jesus and his ministry throughout the world, even if they weren't the first ones to start.

How often have we been called on to do something, great or small, and we were too scared to leave our comfort zones and do it? What great opportunities have we missed when we have given in to fears or doubts? This might be the time to be like Peter and jump in with all our might, and despite the storms raging around us, put one foot in front of the other, keep our eyes on the Savior, and discover the amazing things we are capable of.

Staying in the boat may be comfortable and safe, but that's not what the life of faith is all about.

The words that we heard earlier from Deuteronomy were God's instructions to Moses and the people he led through the desert. Possibly, Moses wanted to remind the new generation that had grown up during the desert wandering that they, too, were God's chosen people. It could be that since they were getting ready to enter the land God promised to them, Moses was announcing the formation of the nation of Israel. In either case, it was a new start for the people. And that's where we are heading, aren't we? A new start here at First Presbyterian.

Christ calls us to find out what he is doing in the world, and then to throw ourselves wholeheartedly into his cause.

I realize that it's risky to walk on water. It's possible that you might sink. But you'll never know until you get out of the boat.

So what do you say? Although We might not always agree on everything, and whether you consider yourself a leader, or a follower, how about if we all hold hands and jump in together- because our success depends on the involvement of both leaders AND followers. Keeping our eyes on the Savior, let's share the talents that we have, and together watch our church enter boldly into our next chapter.

AMEN