

The 10th Sunday after Pentecost
August 9, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

1 Kings 19:9-18
Psalm 85:8-13
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

I'm reminded this morning of an old Irish story:

Paddy had long heard the stories of an amazing family tradition.

It seems that his father, his grandfather and his great-grandfather had all been able to walk on water on their 18th birthday. On that special day, they'd each walked across the lake to the pub on the far side for their first legal drink.

So when Paddy's 18th birthday came around, he and his pal Mick, took a boat out to the middle of the lake, Paddy, stepped out of the boat ... and nearly drowned! Mick just barely managed to pull him to safety.

Furious and confused, Paddy went to see his grandmother. "Granny," he asked, "'tis me 18th birthday, so why can't I walk across the lake like me father, his father, and his father before him?"

His grandmother looked deeply into Paddy's, troubled blue eyes and said, "Because ye father, ye grandfather and ye great-grandfather were all born in December, when the lake is frozen, and ye were born in August, ya idiot!"

If there's a moral of the story, I suppose it's this: use your head and, unless the lake is frozen, don't try to walk on water. And whatever shortcomings we see in Paddy, take note of this: a shortage of faith isn't one of them.

I tell you this story this morning to say the same about Peter. I think Peter gets a bad rap if all we remember is that he sank because he didn't have enough faith. In point of fact, I think Peter shows a commendable faith on this occasion.

And it wasn't the first time. No, Peter first demonstrated faith the day Jesus first called him and some others to follow him and become his disciples and "fish for people." As Matthew records it, "Immediately they left their nets and followed him." ⁱ That takes some faith.

And then there was that occasion when Jesus sent the disciples out, two by two, on a missionary journey. "Take no gold, or silver ... no bag for your journey, or two tunics," Jesus told them. "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves," he went on to say. ⁱⁱ And neither Peter nor any of the others seemed to hesitate. That takes some faith.

We heard about another moment here last Sunday. When the crowds of people were hungry, the disciples wanted Jesus to send them all away so they could get something for themselves to eat. But Jesus told the disciples that it was up to them to feed everyone. Jesus took and blessed what little they had to offer, and he gave it back to them to feed the hungry crowds. And that is what they did. And all were fed, with plenty left over at the end. ⁱⁱⁱ That takes some faith.

And in this morning's gospel, Peter (and the others) show some faith before Peter ever got his feet wet. It started that evening when they got into that boat in the first place. After a long, hot day – and after all they had done – Jesus made them cross to the other side. And they did. And though they spent the night battered by the waves and making slow progress, or none at all, they went. That, too, takes some faith.

Of course, it all comes down to what we mean when we think about faith in the first place.

At least in the biblical sense of the word, faith has little to do with belief in a particular outcome or an intellectual assent to a proposition. It has everything to do with trust. Enough trust to do more than we might reasonably take on otherwise. Sarah Dylan Breuer says that faith has less to do with the brain than with a heart that gets the blood pumping to our hands and feet. ^{iv}

Peter is not the exemplar of one who lacks such faith. In all of our readings this morning, that distinction falls to Elijah. Elijah – at least in that moment described for us in our first reading this morning – is the “poster child” for lacking this kind of faith. We find him holed up in a cave, shirking all responsibility and hoping that God's call on him (to step out of that cave) will pass him by.

And even there, we see, God does not give up. God calls out to Elijah in surprising ways. And Elijah hears God speaking to him from an unexpected place.

I think on all this as I consider that moment in our gospel when Jesus comes walking out to Peter and the disciples. They're terrified, and it's easy enough to imagine why they'd decide that the sight before them must have been some sort of an apparition, a specter, a ghost!

Jesus tells them to take heart, but they're not easily convinced – and rightly so, the way the story's told. So Peter devises a “test” to see if it really is Jesus:

“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Now there are those who will tell you that it's like putting God to the test, that the question is itself a sign of Peter's lack of faith. But that's not how I see it.

And I'm not alone. The Methodist bishop and preacher William Willimon recalls all the times Jesus called on the disciples to do something outrageous.

I've reminded you of a few of those occasions already: when they were asked to drop everything to follow Jesus, when they were sent out on a missionary journey – “like sheep into the midst of wolves” – without any resources to support them, when they were told to feed thousands upon thousands.

Williamon thinks that's why Peter asks his question that morning:

"Lord, if it is you, command me to risk my life, to tempt death, to walk out across 6,000 fathoms of dark, swirling, threatening sea."

... Peter was uncertain that the voice from the waves was the voice of Jesus until, unless, that voice commanded him, "Come on out, the water's fine."

And that's how you will know Jesus. Jesus is the one who extravagantly, recklessly, commands you to leave the safety of the boat, to step into the sea, to test the waters, and show what your faith is made of. That's Jesus. ^v

So Peter calls out to Jesus, saying:

"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

And Jesus says:

"Come."

Those are the words printed for us this morning. But there's always a challenge when reading a text like this. Those words are recorded for posterity, but not the tonal quality, not the emotional flavor, not the facial expressions or the other hints as to how we should imagine it all.

We don't know whether Jesus had a smile on his face as he spoke. We don't hear any indication of how Jesus spoke the words. We have to fill in those gaps.

And I, for my part, imagine Jesus smiling at Peter, finding this all delightfully amusing.

And maybe it doesn't matter. After all, however Jesus responded, his response is all the encouragement Peter needs. He gets out of the boat and walks on water.

Oh, it's only for a moment. But he does it. Peter walks on water.

And then he sinks – as he inevitably must. But I don't think of this moment as a problem.

Now, a pretty common way of preaching on this story is to draw our attention to the fact that it's only when Peter is distracted by the wind that blows so strongly that he is struck with fear and begins to sink. This way of understanding the story emphasizes that Peter walks on water only as long as he's walking toward Jesus, only so long as he keeps his eyes on Jesus.

I can see how it reads that way, to say that this is the moment when Peter essentially “fails” the faith test.

But that’s not how it unfolds for me. No, I remain more impressed that Peter steps out at all.

And perhaps someone will point to Jesus’ words as he reaches out to save Peter:

“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Again, I get why we hear these words as a stern rebuke, a criticism of Peter’s lack of faith.

But I wonder. After all, we only have the words – not the tonal quality, not the expressions. We fill in those gaps – unconsciously, if not consciously.

So, yes, maybe Jesus really was disappointed in Peter. Or maybe Jesus was still delightfully amused by his audacity. Oh, it was more than Peter could pull off, but God bless him for trying!!

Eugene Peterson’s translation is a bit different. The way he puts it, Jesus reaches out and says:

“Faint-hearted, what got into you?”

His version makes it easy for me to imagine that Jesus might have been bursting with amusement – perhaps a little at the expense of Peter. But still I imagine Jesus asking his question of Peter ever so gently, and with a twinkle in his eye and a laugh in his throat.

I imagine Jesus as amused, as bemused, as impressed, maybe even amazed, that Peter showed any faith at all under the circumstances?

And even if a somber “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” is the better translation, Peter has enough faith – as he begins to sink – to call out to Jesus, trusting that Jesus will save him. And that is what he does.

And remember, also, what Jesus once said about a “little faith,” that even faith the size of a mustard seed is enough to move mountains.^{vi}

So what’s the moral of this story?

I don’t think it has anything to do with our lacking the faith it would take for us to walk on water on a hot summer’s day.

I think it has everything to do with not being content merely to sit back and hope the storms of life subside. I think it has everything to do with a God who delights in those moments when we are willing to risk, when we’re willing to step out of the boat, not knowing if we’ll sink or swim.

And how much faith do we need?

Well, we're going to need a little faith, that's for sure.

But maybe not as much as we might have imagined. Faith doesn't mean talking ourselves into absolute confidence about what tomorrow will bring. But we can step out all the same, not knowing if we'll sink beneath the waves or skate across the lake, trusting that the Holy One will reach out to us either way, to catch us when we sink or when we fall – as we inevitably will.

And remember that moment when Peter sinks, for that is precisely when Jesus reaches a hand out to save ... to catch him.

That is a faith to lay claim to.

ⁱ *Matthew 4:20.*

ⁱⁱ *Matthew 10:9-10, 16.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Matthew 14:13-21.*

^{iv} Sarah Dylan Breuer @ http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/08/proper_14_year_.html.

^v William Willimon, "How Will You Know If It's Jesus" @ http://day1.org/950-how_you_will_know_if_its_jesus.

^{vi} *Matthew 17:20.*