

“PETER: II – SOARING OR SINKING”

Karen F. Bunnell  
Elkton United Methodist Church  
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Matthew 14:22-33

Every year, about this time, we celebrate Boy Scout Sunday. It's always a wonderful day in our church, because we get to hear about all the amazing things that our two groups – Boy Scout Troop 443 and Cub Pack 443 are doing. I'm always amazed by their accomplishments, and downright astonished by some of the activities they do – especially the more rigorous activities of the older Boy Scouts. They go camping, and hiking, and white water rafting – and well, you know – if it's some outdoor, adventurous activity – they pretty much do it!

So those Scouts that are here may have heard this morning's Gospel lesson about the disciples being caught in a storm on a lake – and thought, “Yep, been there, done that!” Somehow, in the recesses of my mind, I remember Tim Fisher once talking about the Scouts being caught in a storm!

Those Scouts know, and indeed all of us know, as well, how one day you can be walking along in a peaceful, tranquil scene and the next, a storm will break loose. One day you can be soaring in good times, and the next, sinking, in trouble.

Today, in the Gospel lesson Peter has discovered that. He, along with the other disciples, are in a boat on a stormy sea, at risk of their very lives. You heard the story – Jesus and his disciples have been ministering to the crowds (that's the soaring part of the story) – they've been blessed to be in ministry with Jesus, and the day is over. Jesus dismisses the people, and then needs some time to himself, so he goes up the mountain by himself to pray. He sends the disciples on their way in the boat to get to the other side.

Some time passes, and suddenly the disciples find their boat in danger of capsizing because of strong winds that have come up. They're pretty scared, but nothing prepares them for what they see next – they see a figure walking on top of the water toward them. They are scared to death – and fear they might be seeing a ghost – and the scripture says they cried out! (I wonder how many of them were second guessing their decision to follow Jesus – if this is where it would get them?!)

For that matter, I wonder how many of us are tempted to second guess our decision to follow Jesus when that means being challenged or suffering in any way? And it usually does – strike that, it always does. Discipleship is tough, following Jesus, living as he would have us live, and loving as he would have us love, is tough.

He asks us to love the unlovable, to turn the other cheek, to give of what we have and not just generously, but sacrificially, to take risks, to let Him call the shots. It's tough being a disciple, and sometimes, it feels like you're in a rocky boat and the waves are threatening to take you down.

I read this week about a couple whose child was lost in the tragedies of September 11, 2001. She worked in one of the towers of the World Trade Center and the couples' friends and neighbors did everything they could to console them. One person even reminded them to turn to their faith in Christ for strength – to go to church the next Sunday and find help. And you know what their response was? They said no, they wouldn't be going, because they were Christians and they knew what Jesus wanted them to do – and that was to forgive the people who had done this terrible thing – and they just weren't ready to do that. (On-line, "How Will You Know if It's Jesus?", William Willimon)

Following Jesus is demanding and challenging, and sometimes, pretty tough – so sadly, many turn away from the call, or do it half-heartedly. We don't let ourselves even get in the boat of discipleship, or as Bishop William Willimon put it so well – "too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith." He continues – "The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea, you have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture." (Ibid.)

If truth be told, Willimon is probably more right than we wish – full, faithful discipleship, following Jesus fully and faithfully is tough, so we splash about in the safe shallows. We're like that little boy I once told you about who looked like he was madly swimming away in the pool, but in reality, he was just splashing around with one foot anchored to the bottom. From all outward appearances, we look like faithful Christians, but when push comes to shove, when discipleship is demanding or hard or even scary – not so much.

Well, poor old Peter and the other disciples were right in the middle of making that discovery – and they were scared to death. They knew they might die, and then Jesus came along, walking across the water. After Jesus had identified himself, saying no indeed, it wasn't a ghost, Peter, ever the impetuous one, challenged him. "Well Jesus, if it's you, command me to walk on the water." So he did, and indeed, Peter got out of the boat, and amazingly, began to walk on the water! Amazing, at least, until he took his eyes off of Jesus and back on the storm, back on the reality that this was challenging and difficult and way too much to handle. And when he took his eyes off of Jesus, he began to sink.

Thanks be to God for his amazing grace, because Jesus came to Peter's rescue. He reached out and grabbed hold of him and saved him from drowning, yet even while he did he chided him about not trusting him enough.

And just as quickly as the episode began, so it ended, and the journey of discipleship went on for Peter and Jesus – sometimes soaring (mountaintop experiences), and sometimes sinking.

That's what true discipleship is like – it indeed has its ups and downs, but you already know that, don't you? There are times when being a Christian and following Jesus fully and faithfully is a piece of cake, and it brings you and him great joy. But there are other times when it is uncomfortable, and risky, and it takes you way out of your comfort zone, and you don't much like it.

And it is for those occasions, when discipleship is costly, that I want to invite us to learn a few things from Peter's story today – for I think they will serve us well.

First, through all the ups and downs of discipleship, Peter found it worth the risk, for in completely surrendering himself to Jesus' will for his life, he found great meaning and joy. He was a partner with Jesus in changing lives. He got to see how Jesus touched people, and made them whole. He was able to tell his own story to others that they might open their hearts to Jesus. And even when times were hard, like this time at sea, afterwards Peter could witness to others about, literally, the saving love of Jesus Christ.

The ups and downs of discipleship are worth the risk, friends, and in surrendering ourselves to Jesus' will for our lives, there is great joy to be found. Writer James Moore has said that, "when Jesus came to the seashore and said to Simon and Andrew and James and John, 'Follow me,' it would have been a lot easier for those fishermen to stay with their boats. But look what they would have missed! They made the leap of faith, they took the risk, they dropped their familiar nets, and followed him. And with him, they turned the world upside down!" (James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, p. 92)

Journeying with Jesus is worth the risk, for with Him, we can touch and change the world - that's the first thing to learn from this story.

And the second builds on that – Jesus is always with us on the journey. Or in modern parlance, "he's got our back – always." Jesus never calls us to venture forth anywhere, or to do anything, where he is not right there with us, through the power of the Holy Spirit to hold us up, and give us what we need. He called Peter to walk on the water, and he was right there both when he tried, and when he failed – encouraging him when he tried, and catching him when he failed. Peter was never alone, and neither are we, when we have the courage to be Jesus' disciple.

I think of all of the times I have been frightened when doing something I felt Jesus wanted me to do – reaching out to someone who had hurt me, inviting strangers to come to church, why, even the very first time I had to read scripture in church – I was totally scared to death; and even, most recently, a couple of weeks ago I had to offer devotions for a gathering of the Board of Ordained Ministry. Offering devotions to forty pastors sitting there is intimidating, and I'm going to be honest with you, I was a nervous wreck. But in every single one of those situations,

Jesus was with me, and a peace came over me, and carried me through – every single time. When He calls us, He goes with us, and gives us what we need. He did that for Peter, He’s done it for me more times than I can count, and He’ll do it for you, if you dare, as Willimon said to get out of the shallow waters and dive into discipleship.

Finally, let me remind you of one further thing about following Jesus. Never underestimate the power of your witness. Never underestimate the power your faithfulness to Jesus may have to influence someone else, and draw them closer to Him. Look at what the scripture says about what happened after Peter and Jesus got back into the boat after the “walking on water” incident. The scripture says, “Those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly, you are the Son of God.’”

Friends, your story has the power to touch someone else’s life. Your story has the power to tell someone else about the Savior of the World. Your story, your experiences, your discipleship, have the power to draw others to Christ. Never underestimate what will happen if you offer yourself fully and faithfully to Christ and follow where He leads you, in all the ups and downs of discipleship.

People are watching. I was reminded of that very vividly through something I read on Facebook during one of the many recent snowstorms. A man was traveling with his two children recently (one a teenage girl, and the other a 6 year old boy), and the trip involved several plane rides. They were waiting in the airport lounge for the first flight, when it was announced the flight would be delayed. The delay went on and on, and the father was doing all he could to keep the children occupied. Finally, after an interminable delay, the flight was called, and he took his children by the hand and got them onto the plane. Unfortunately, their seats were at the very back of the plane. Once they got settled in, the father got his wits about him and realized that the flight would land at 11 a.m. and their connecting flight was scheduled to take off at 11:02. They would never make it.

So he spoke to the flight attendant, told her his problem, and blessedly, when they were getting close to landing, she got on the PA system and asked if the other passengers would kindly remain in their seats when they got to the gate, to let this father and his two children rush off and hopefully catch their connecting flight.

Well, the plane landed, they pulled into the gate, and no sooner had the “fasten your seatbelt sign” been turned off, then the entire plane full of people got up and filled the aisle in an attempt to get off of the plane. And the father and his children were stuck in the back!

He was furious, and sick of everybody. He was disgusted that everyone was so stuck on themselves that they couldn’t be spared a couple of minutes to help him out. When he finally got off the plane, he was practically dragging the kids through the terminal, now in an effort to book another flight to get them home.

He caught sight of a man who worked for the airline who was just walking away from the ticket counter, and stopped him and asked him for help. The man

was in a hurry and pretty much brushed him off and told him to go over to an automated ticket kiosk. He hardly gave him the time of day.

Well, that did it. The man lit into him, yelling and cursing at him as he walked away, calling him callous and uncaring, and how he should be fired, and what kind of airline was it anyway, and on and on and on! Then he walked with his kids over to the kiosk, got their tickets, and took them to sit down in a nearby lounge.

And it was then that he saw his son's face – and in an instant his heart sank – because he knew what his son had seen. He had watched his Dad yell and scream and act like a baby. The man was heartbroken, and so ashamed of himself for how he had behaved in front of his children.

But you know what? Rather than just let it be, he decided to do something about it. So he tracked down the man – he was back behind the counter again – and he waited in line with his children to get to the counter – and then, in front of his children, and God, and everyone, he apologized. He apologized for his attitude, he apologized for his words, he apologized for his arrogance. He apologized. And you know what? The man from the airline said that no one had ever done that before – he had been berated many a time, but no one had ever stood in line to apologize to him, and he deeply thanked him. And that little boy saw it – just as surely as he had seen the first episode, he saw his father take on the difficult demands of discipleship, if you will, and no doubt, he will never forget it. (On-line, “To the Ticket Agent at the Delta Counter,” Josh Misner, PhD, Huffington Post, Feb. 11, 2014)

Friends, our church's mission is to be people and a place where people come to know Jesus, be known by Jesus, and make Him known to others. When we take up the mantle of discipleship –with all its ups and downs – we can do just that. So may we answer Jesus' call – knowing that there may be times when He asks us to walk on water. May we do it anyway, fully and faithfully – joyfully journeying with Him and relying on Him to take us where we need to go and give us all that we need to do it. May it be so.

Amen.