

## “ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER”

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

A couple of Sundays ago I had to rush out of here after worship, grab some lunch, throw my luggage in the car, and head down to Camp Pecometh where I would be on the faculty of the Local Pastors’ Licensing School. I had to be there for the start of a 4:30 pm worship service, so, needless to say, I didn’t have a lot of wiggle room in the schedule.

So I got everything done, hopped in the car knowing that I had exactly the time I needed to get there, and headed down Route 213. I was cruising down the road, all systems go, until I approached the Bohemia River and saw a string of taillights lit up in front of me at the draw bridge, which, yes, was up. Oy vey! I strained my neck to see why, and saw two sailboats, not very big ones, mind you, slowly sailing through the opening.

I was more than slightly irritated. Not only was I now going to be late, but sailboats and I don’t have a great history. I’ve been on a sailboat exactly once in my life. Once! Back when I was in the Girl Scouts, which meant I was probably in late elementary school, our troop went down to camp at Grove Point near Earleville. One of the things we were going to do was learn how to sail, so all of us went out on these little teeny sailboats – probably two of us to a sailboat – and suffice it to say, it was a disaster. I don’t remember many of the details, except that ours capsized, and I went under, and was sure I was going to drown. It scared me to death, and thus ended my career as a sailor.

So every single time I read the scripture passage that is today’s Gospel lesson, I feel for those disciples. I get it. I understand how scared they were by that tremendous wind coming across the sea. Matthew said that the wind had pushed them far away from the land, so there they were at the mercy of nature, and the boat is rocking side to side, and any minute now, they could capsize. It was overwhelming and they were scared to death.

Now, I don’t know how many of you were ever in danger of capsizing in a boat, but I do know probably all of you know what it’s like when life becomes a storm, and the winds and the waves, threaten to take you down. Something comes up suddenly and takes your breath away, takes the legs out from under you – and you don’t know how you’ll go on.

Many of us experienced that this week. Just this week alone, I heard about a person who walked into his office of many, many years, a place where he’d worked

and established relationships and seniority, and was told his services were no longer needed, and in the blink of an eye, he was out the door and jobless.

Then there's a woman that I've known for a long time from another part of the state who was juggling marriage, children, a job, and volunteer work who sat down recently after dinner with her husband only to be told by him that he just wasn't happy anymore and was leaving. There wasn't anybody else, he just wasn't happy and he had to go find himself. And there she was, suddenly alone with a lot of stuff on her shoulders and her shoulders alone.

And then, of course, there's us, so many of us, who heard the devastating news on Wednesday that our hale and hearty 47 year old friend Donny, custodian of our church and Leeds Elementary School, had dropped over suddenly and was gone.

The storms of life – when the winds and the waves overwhelm us – and take away our breath, stop us in our tracks. Storms happen, they happen to all of us at one time or another, and they leave us stunned, feeling like we're hanging on by a thread, wondering how we can keep on going.

So we get why the disciples were frightened by that storm that day. We totally understand their fear.

What I'd like us to do for a few moments this morning, is to look at how they dealt with it, because I think they did some things right, and some things not so right, and I think all of us can learn from their story.

The first thing they did was right – they cried out. The scripture says “they cried out in fear.” They didn't try to “man up.” They didn't keep their feelings bottled up inside – they cried out.

Friends, that's a healthy way to deal with the storms of life – to cry out. We see people doing that all throughout scripture – pouring out their feelings – good or bad – about what's happened to them. Ah, but too often, we don't do that. Instead, we retreat inside ourselves, we keep things bottled up, we don't share honestly and openly, and it takes a toll on us.

I had a Christian Education professor in seminary named Diedra Kriewald. When she was young, just out of seminary, she married a man who was a pastor as well, and one day, they took a group of young people from their church on a mission trip to Mexico. He drove one car filled with youth and she drove the other.

On one day of the trip, they had finished their work and they were returning to their lodging for the night, Diedra's car following her husband's, and right before her eyes, his car was crashed into by a truck, and her husband and several of the youth were killed instantly.

As you can imagine, it was a horrible, horrible time for her and everybody else. But Diedra, being what she thought was a good pastor, kept a stiff-upper lip and never showed anyone the toll it was taking on her. She said all the right

things, all the holy things. She didn't want people to think she didn't have faith in God, or that she questioned him or how really angry she was on the horrible turn her life had taken – so she plastered a smile on her face and kept sweet, trusting words on her lips – and in the end, it nearly killed her. Not dealing with her true feelings nearly killed her.

The disciples got it right – they poured out their feelings – and so should we. God can take it, and it is the healthy way to move through times when storms want to take us out. So that's something they did right.

And one of them – Peter – did something else right as well. He stepped out of the boat and into the stormy water. He dared to put one foot in front of the other in the midst of the storm. That's a tough thing to do when you're immobilized by fear or uncertainty or sadness or anger – to dare to take some control of the situation by putting one foot in front of the other and moving forward. It's almost like that little train in the Children's Time book and his mantra, "I think I can! I think I can! I think I can!" You have to push yourself to take the first step, and then the next step, and the next step – not to see the whole overwhelming picture at one time and decide you can't do it, and you throw up your hands. It's one foot in front of the other.

Back to Diedra again – that's the way she finally healed from her shock and sadness – she began to put one foot in front of the other, and just tried to do some small, normal things. She got a dog, who lavished her with unconditional love. She started reading poetry which lifted her spirit. Slowly but surely, she started to go out with friends. Little things, small steps, one foot in front of the other – until one day, she heard herself laugh again, and bought herself a bright colored car, and eventually she fell in love again and has now been married to that man for decades. But all of that began with one small step, putting one foot in front of the other – the only way to move on after storms hit.

So those are some good things to do – good things that the disciples did when that storm struck. But here's something they did wrong – a very, very big wrong – and it was Peter who did it. He took his eyes off of Jesus. Oh, he took the first step out of the boat, he put one foot in front of the other to walk towards the Lord, but then he looked down, and took his eyes off of Jesus, and he began to sink again.

Peter took his eyes off the source of his rescue, off of the one who could lead him to safety, who could lead him to life. Oh friends, we dare not do that – for Jesus is the one who, if we take his hand, will lead us through the storms and guide us into safety and new life.

Did you ever hear the old story about the little girl who was so excited because her father was going to take her to the movies to see "Snow White"? Someone asked her, "But won't you be afraid of the wicked witch?" And she said, "No, when the wicked witch comes on, I won't look at her, I'll just look at my father!" (James W. Moore, *Attitude is Your Paintbrush*, p. 131)

I'll just look at my father. That's what we need to do when storms hit – look at God our Father, keep our eyes on Jesus, for guidance, for comfort, for strength, for help in putting one foot in front of the other, and for healing from all of life's hurt. Look at the Father.

Well, friends, you know what the best part of this story is? The best part of the story is that through the whole thing – through the winds, the waves, the fear, the uncertainty, the tentativeness – through it all – Jesus is coming to the disciples – and the same is true for us. No matter what we face, Jesus comes to us. He comes to us, because he loves us. He always comes toward us, and all we have to do is reach out and take his hand, and he'll walk us into the future, and through anything life brings our way.

What an image to keep in our mind always – that Jesus is always coming toward us, reaching out with his hand, inviting us to let him lead our life's journey.

So let me flesh out that image by way of a story. It was told by a woman named Virginia Law Shell. She is a missionary and she was on a mission in the Congo when one dark night, this happened. Listen to her words:

“Older men served as night sentries for our missionary homes. They swept our yards, heated our bath water, guarded our homes, and were most useful at carrying notes at night between homes . . .

One night I heard a familiar cough. When I went to the door, I could just make out the figure of Papa Jean, (one of the most dedicated sentries), holding out a note. It was a dark tropical night. No moon or stars were shining. There were no street lights on this isolated mission station. A small, six-inch kerosene lantern with a smoky chimney in Papa Jean's hand gave the only smattering of light.

*Such a pitiful little light in such a dark night,* I thought.

“That lamp doesn't give much light, does it Papa?” I asked him.

‘No, it doesn't,’ he answered. ‘But it shines as far as I can step.’”

You know what? Virginia never forgot those words that Papa Jean said.

“Oh, how often I remember Papa Jean (she finished). I can learn to trust God for my future, for I have learned that his light does always shine as far as I can step.” (Ibid, p. 36)

And there you go! When the storms of life come your way, as they will, be honest and open with your feelings, and then step out, put one foot in front of the other, with your eyes fixed on Jesus – knowing that he's always coming to you, and his light will always guide your way. Thanks be to God!

Amen.