

Proper 14 A 2017
August 13, 2017 :: Matthew 14: 22-33
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“Get Out of the Boat.”

There are two things I want to say about the first half (*i.e.*, the first paragraph) of our gospel reading. The first is that the lesson contained therein is pretty clear, and we’ll get to that in a moment. The second is that what actually happened isn’t so clear, and we’ll deal with that first.

Our gospel begins immediately following the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus orders his disciples to get into a boat and sail from where they’re located, at the northeast corner of the Sea of Galilee, to their next destination, at the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus will eventually meet them. In the meantime, Jesus finds a nice quiet place to pray.

Several hours later, there was a sudden and unexpected violent storm, which put the disciples and their boat in jeopardy. Back on shore, as Jesus ended his prayers, he began to follow the coastal road that would take him to that place where he was to meet the disciples.

From our gospel reading, we can infer what happened next. Sometime in the early morning hours, Jesus, walking on the high ground at the north end of the lake, clearly saw the disciples' boat fighting against the wind and the waves, and he came down to the shore to help the disciples.

And it's here that we have a hard time knowing exactly what happened. Verse 25 of our gospel reads:

And early in the morning he came walking
toward them **on the sea**.

And then, verse 26 continues:

But when the disciples saw him walking **on
the sea**, they were terrified...

Now, the problem is that those two phrases, though they are exactly alike in English, come from different Greek words.

In verse 25, the Greek can mean either **over the sea** or **towards the sea**. In verse 26, the Greek can mean either **on the**

sea (as it's translated here in English) or **at the sea**, which is to say, by the shore of that lake. Adding to the confusion, the word that gets translated into English as "walking," in both verses, is the Greek word that means **to walk about**, which sounds a bit like someone meandering or roaming around.

Here's the bottom line: as far as translating the original Greek into English, there are two viable ways of interpreting this text.

On the one hand, we may choose to make this story into the description of a miracle, in which Jesus actually walked on water. And that would probably be fine with the author of Matthew's gospel, because, among other things, he wants to make a claim for the divinity of Jesus.

But on the other hand, we may be more comfortable choosing to look at this story as the simple description of a time when the disciples' boat was driven by the wind to the northern shore of the lake, and that Jesus came walking towards them through the surf, to help bring the boat to shore. And I think the author of Matthew's gospel would be fine with that as well.

And the reason I say that is because, whether we see a miracle or not, the ultimate lesson is the same:

In the hour of the disciples' need, Jesus came to them.

And that's the same message this gospel story holds out for us:

In our hour of need, Jesus is there to help us.

In the end, I'd make the claim that it doesn't really matter if we want to look at what happened as a miracle, or as something natural. Because what's important is not so much *how* the disciples' needs were met, as much as it was the fact that their needs *were* met.

And so are our needs met, because scripture is clear that our God is a God who meets needs.

There's one other point I need to quickly make. I've made the statement several times from this pulpit, that:

More often than not, God meets our needs through others, and that God meets the needs of others through us.

And that means that all of us need to be constantly be open to the possibility of our being used by God as the vehicles of his grace.

Unfortunately, however, too many people feel inadequate to the task of being used in this manner. They may feel they lack the resources, the training, or the know-how. And in seeing someone in need, they may feel compassion for them, they may even *want* to help them, but in the end they do nothing because they lack the assurance that they can make a difference.

And that's where Peter, in the second half of our reading, plays such an important role. In both his *courage* to step out of the boat, and his *fears* which ultimately caused him to sink, Peter has become for us (as one scholar described it):

“...the poster child of both [sufficient] faith and too little faith; of faith giving way to

doubt and fear, but also of faith overcoming one's initial fears.”

And doesn't that so often sound like us? Aren't there times when our faith in God is rock-solid — *Never stronger!* — but when the situation changes, and we're called upon to have that same faith in *ourselves*, then, like Peter, we sink; but even then, and also like Peter, we'll cry out, “Lord, save me!”

And all of a sudden we can fully understand what Jesus meant when he said to Peter,

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

It was never Peter's faith *in Jesus* that was in doubt; rather, it was always Peter's faith *in himself*.

In other words, God has so much more faith in what we can accomplish than we do. God has so much more confidence in our abilities than we do. And when all *we* can see is the wind and the waves, *God* sees an opportunity for us to try our hand at walking on water.

And so, the next time you have an opportunity to help someone in need, but you're thinking, "How can I make any difference?" remember what Peter did: no, I'm not talking about his brief stint at water-walking, though that wasn't too shabby. Rather, I'm talking about the fact that Peter actually got out of the boat.

For a few moments there, Peter believed he could do what God was calling him to do, and he got out of the boat. And so can we, when we realize that, sometimes, all that's being asked of us is the willingness to get our clothes wet and dirty in the surf and sand of life's rough waters. And when we realize that, sometimes, the best ministry can be done when all we can lay claim to is a concerned heart, and ears willing to listen, and with hands willing to help.

In the end, it would change nothing if the Bible scholars had decided to translate this story differently. For in the end, the real lesson is that Jesus comes to us when we are in need, and that Jesus usually meets the needs of others through us.

Do you have a need in your life? Are the winds working against you, and the waves threatening you? Then pray, and Jesus will come to you, and be with you.

Do you know of someone else who has a need in their life? Then pray that Jesus will be with you, and that the two of you can be with that person in their time of need.

In either case, when there are needs, and when there are hearts willing to respond, miracles are bound to happen.

Amen.