

Faith Beyond The Boat

Matthew 14:22-33

August 7, 2011

I.

Earlier this year our Adult Education class had a six-part series on our Gospel reading. Its title was "If You Want To Walk On Water, You've Got To Get Out Of The Boat." It called us to step out in faith, using the gifts God has given to us, to do and be what God wants us to do and be.

I will cover this idea today in much less time, and this sermon will be a little shorter anyway because after I finish, Patty Hourin will speak to us about our St. Thomas Advisory Roundtable.

We start with the well-known story of Jesus walking on water. And it brings to mind another story about some duck hunters up in the Delta.

There was a hunter who had a most unusual dog. He was amazed at how good this dog was as a retriever, and he wanted his friends to see the dog in action. So he arranged a hunting trip.

Early one morning they went to their blinds and waited, along with this special dog. Soon a flock of ducks flew over, and they all raised their shotguns and fired. Several ducks fell from the sky.

Now it was time for the dog to do his work. So the fellow gave the command, and his dog just stepped out onto the lake and walked on the water to fetch the first duck, and brought it back. Then he did the same thing several more times. He just walked out on the lake, and retrieved the birds and walked back until all of them had been recovered.

After this was finished the hunter who owned the dog felt pretty good, and he turned to his buddies, and said, "Say, did you notice anything unusual about my dog? One of the fellows thought a while, and then said, "Yeah, that dog can't swim, can he?"

This story shows, in a humorous way, that sometimes we just don't grasp what's happening right before our eyes. The disciples found themselves in a similar position that night on the lake.

II.

And although our Gospel has several aspects, I want to focus on Peter and the part he played. Specifically, I would like to talk about his faith, both its strength and its weakness.

And Peter sometimes gets a bad rap from theologians. They say he was a fool to even leave the boat, and then they criticize him for his doubts that made him to sink in the water.

For me, however the real story of Peter is the strength of his faith that caused him to step out of the boat in the first place, and that then led him to reach out to Jesus when he got into trouble.

And even though Jesus said to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt," Jesus understood what happened. In faith Peter did something he did not think possible, and then his faith wavered when his attention shifted to worldly things. But his faith prevailed in the end.

We'll cover both of these aspects, and can begin with Peter's courage in leaving the boat. Eleven of the disciples were afraid, but once Peter realized that Jesus had called him to step out on the water, he quickly did so.

This is an obvious example for us. You have heard the term "couch potato" applied to people who just sit on the couch, not moving or doing anything except watching television, playing video games, reading, or something like that.

If we wanted to create a metaphor from this reading, we might coin the phrase, "boat potato." It would describe people who stay in the boat, figuratively speaking, and take no risks, play it safe, and do not grow or gain. They have gifts from God but don't use them. They might say, "I'll start that on Monday." But, of course, Monday never comes.

Peter, however, was no boat potato, was he? There probably was no way Peter believed he could walk on water. It probably had not even occurred to him that Jesus could walk on water. Whoever thought about walking on water anyway? But when Jesus told him to come, he got out of the boat and did it. And for a while, he actually walked on water. He stepped out in faith.

III.

But then human nature took over. Peter stopped focusing on Jesus and started listening to the wind whipping around him. In that instant his faith weakened and the power of the moment was broken. Peter began to sink. But his next words showed his faith was not completely gone.

And here we might think of what some of our golfer friends sometimes say when they hit the ball in the rough or out of bounds. They might react with a certain well-known word frequently heard on American golf courses.

Peter could have said something like that, but the reading tells us he called the Lord to save him. Peter did not panic, and the faith that caused him to trust in Jesus in the first place returned.

There is a lesson about this in an old *I Love Lucy* episode. Lucy was about to give birth, in reality and on the show. So Fred, Ethel, and Ricky practiced for the big moment. Ethel would call the doctor, Fred would get the cab, Ricky would get the suitcase. They rehearsed this procedure several times to perfection.

Then Lucy walked in and said it's time. At first they acted like they didn't hear her. Then they panicked and ran in every direction. They ran into each other and spilled the suitcase. Then they gathered up all the clothes and ran out the door, leaving Lucy alone in the apartment crying. You can imagine the scene. Panic is human nature. Sometimes it's the default reaction.

But salvation rather than panic is the story today. Peter did not panic, and what Jesus did for him that night on the lake foreshadowed what he soon would do for all humanity on the cross. He reached out to Peter when he cried out, held him up, and brought him safely back to the boat.

IV.

But then Jesus said to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" And note that Jesus did not mean Peter had no faith, but rather that Peter's faith had been temporarily overcome. Peter's doubts about the wind interfered with his faith and weakened the power that Jesus had given him. He began to think his situation was impossible, when in reality Jesus made it all possible.

Another story reminds me of the possibility of impossibilities. A few years ago, the crew of a Japanese trawler was rescued in the Sea of Japan clinging to the wreckage of their sunken ship.

And when they returned to shore they all were immediately imprisoned when they told Japanese authorities that a large cow, mooing loudly and falling at a high rate of speed out of a clear blue sky, had struck the trawler amidships, shattering its hull and sinking the vessel within minutes.

They remained in prison for several weeks until the Russian Air Force reluctantly informed Japanese authorities that the crew of one of its cargo planes had stolen a cow wandering at the edge of a Siberian airfield, forced the cow into the plane's hold, and took off.

Unprepared for live cargo, the Russian crew could not deal with a rampaging cow in the plane. So to save the aircraft and themselves, the Russians shoved the animal out of the cargo hold over the Sea of Japan at 30,000 feet. Bull's eye, no pun intended. Now the Japanese sailors' story could have been true, and they were released. The impossible had become possible.

That leads to the teaching of today's reading. Just as Peter could not do on his own what he could do through Jesus, in the same way what we think is impossible in our own strength and understanding also is possible when we trust in Jesus.

And we are much like Peter. We put our problems at the foot of the cross, but cannot resist the temptation to grab them back again. Peter also could not resist thinking about the dangers of the storm rather than the sanctuary offered by his Lord. We cannot truly step out in faith if we continue to calculate the odds of whether or not it will work.

V.

And so our Gospel describes human condition. In some way or another, at some time or another, we can be caught between faith and doubt. In an instant we can falter. It could be a moment of anger, or greed, or prideful arrogance, or a moral lapse. It could be something that hurts another, or something known only to us, and to God.

We all, like Peter, take our eyes off Jesus and start to listen to the wind. We focus on the turmoil of life rather than the peace of the Lord, and in that moment we start to sink. In that moment we are called to reach out to Jesus and say, "Lord, save me." And the good news is we know he always will.

Peter's story is our story. It's the story of God's disciples in every age, and it describes what it means to be a Christian struggling with faith in the storms that trouble this fallen world. And we find that we cannot navigate without our Lord's sustaining power.

Please think about this. In Peter's case, he started to walk on the water so that he might know God's power. And he started sink so that he might know his own weakness.

The same is true for us. We can step out in faith, trust in the Lord, and answer his call even though we don't see how what we are about to do is possible. Or we can stay in the boat, rely only on our own knowledge and abilities, and miss out on God's gifts.

There is a story of a fellow who arrived in heaven and saw several people leaving a large building with sad looks on their faces. He asked an angel about it, and the angel took him inside.

The building was full of doors with names on them. They came to a door bearing this fellow's name, and when he opened it he also became crestfallen. Still inside were all the blessings God wanted to give him during his earthly life, but he did not ask. He never got out of the boat.

For us, as with Peter, God gives us power when we believe. We can do in God's strength what we cannot do on our own. And also for us, as with Peter, if we step out and then doubt, God will stretch out his saving hand. So get out of the boat. Don't let your blessings remain in heaven. It truly is a win-win deal. *Amen.*