

## GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 14]  
Sunday, August 7, 2005

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

### MOTIVATED TO TAKE THE RISK OF FAITH

Did you know that certain scientists have tried to figure out exactly how Jesus walked on the water? Apparently, shifting currents in the Sea of Galilee occasionally produce shallow places stretching far out from the shore. In the middle of the night, it would be very difficult to tell for sure if Jesus were walking on a sandbar or on the water. 2000 years later, the image of Jesus defying the laws of physics, still captivates our imagination as certain people try to explain away this powerful image recorded in Scripture. I love this gospel story not because it explains how Jesus walked on water; I love it because I think I can picture in my mind what the story and the image of Jesus walking on the water teaches. The story teaches us about faith. Jesus' final admonition makes that clear: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

We can hear the story critical of Peter's actions, focusing on his falling in the water as a failure. One interpretation is that Peter, responding to Jesus' call and full of faith, stepped out of the boat and began walking on the water toward Jesus. Suddenly, a gust of wind rises up and distracts him from his faithful focus. Peter realizes where he is and begins to fall. Peter's doubts lead him to sink, so he desperately calls out to Jesus who calmly reaches out his hand and saves him from the drowning in the water. The sea in biblical times was usually a metaphor for the chaotic forces of the world. Through Peter's failure, we hear that being faithful means to rise above the chaos around us and stay single-minded in our focus on Jesus. No doubt, that was an important reminder during the time this story was first written down. Early Christians were persecuted by the Romans and Peter had no doubt already been killed for the cause of faith when this oral story became Holy Scripture. Therefore, we can hear Peter being chewed out for not having enough faith and for being distracted. The point is that we are supposed to be more focused on Jesus and more disciplined in our lives. This is an important reminder, to be sure. However, has hearing the story this way given Peter a bad rap? Like the disciples in the boat, the safest thing to do for some people amid the storms of life is to stay in the boat, afraid of the storm's power, afraid of the shadows and of the ghosts in the late night, very early morning.

However, when does one called to be a follower of Christ get out of the boat and take some action like the action Peter was moved to do? That too is an important question for us called to be disciples of Jesus in our day and time. Believing in Jesus does not mean only signing off on a list of statements about Jesus and then staying in the boat. Having faith in Jesus means, a willingness to follow Jesus—not because we already got the rest of the story plotted out once we made the decision or heard Christ's call, but because we take seriously that Jesus is Lord. Faith is not an activity of the brain so much as of the heart. Faith in Christ is about doing. A faithful person says to Jesus, "I don't know where you are going for sure, but I would rather be drowning with you than

be crowned by someone else." That kind of trust in Jesus comes from experience with Jesus in Word, Sacrament and in Service for action. How much we can trust Jesus is a major part of the journey of faith. A journey always involves risk and action. Faith is a function of the heart that gets the blood to the feet and the hands and that means that faith' starts with action, with taking a step forward, with taking a risk. The best intentions in the world do not do much without action, but taking that step, just might give you the experience of meeting Jesus on the road or in this case, in the sea.

In rehearsing the story, notices that Jesus never specifies which of Peter's actions were faithful and which were doubt-filled. As Jesus approaches, the rest of the disciples sit fearfully in the boat, but Peter manages to speak not words of faith but challenge, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." This does not sound like an affirmation of faith. It is more like a kind of a bluff, like, "OK, if you are so powerful make me do something I should not do, like walk on the water." Jesus sees right through Peter and calmly calls him on by saying, "Come." Peter is invited out of the protection of the boat and the safety of his friends, to risk the stormy churning waters, the chaos of life. Notice that Jesus does not try to protect him from the reality of the sea, but rather invites him out in the middle of it. Jesus also does not condemn Peter but understands who he is as an imperfect child of God. Peter's challenging words to Jesus makes his first steps feel more like arrogance rather than steps of faith. Suddenly a wind distracts him, and he recognizes that he is frightened. His fear is a sign of the unraveling not of his faith, but perhaps of his self-righteousness. Stripped of his arrogance, Peter wakes up to the reality of the situation, he is surrounded by the water and he has nothing to hold on to. He dangles in the waters of the troubled world, faced with the forces of death and destruction and he begins to sink. This image would remind the ancient readers of Christian persecution and we could think of modern hot spots of war, poverty, starvation, and conflict as we picture Peter struggling to stay on top of the water. As Peter is sinking, he cries out, "Lord, save me!" No longer is Peter testing Jesus and searching for his own power. He simply reaches out to Jesus. This is an act of faithfulness. Moreover, Jesus responds and saves him. Faith is the willingness to step outside the boat. It is willingness to reach out to Jesus when and especially when you have nothing else to hold on to.

Why does Jesus say that Peter has "little faith?" It is not the faith Peter lacks that concerns Jesus, it is the faith he has that is called into question. Peter has little faith. Jesus addresses his followers as people of "little faith" repeatedly in Matthew's gospel, but following the last of those addresses Jesus talks about having faith the size of a mustard seed. How much faith do you need to make a difference in your life or the world? Not much and that is good thing. However, faith is not about knowing as much as it is about risking. Without judging Peter's actions to be a result of doubt, we see Peter surrendering (taking a risk) and casting his fate with Jesus. He gives up his fear and risks, stepping out of the boat, as he trusts in God's power. This is an act of faith.

The storms we face are quite different from those faced by Peter and the first disciples. The church in the modern world faces many challenges. I urge you to pray for the ELCA Assembly delegates in Orlando this week, including Don Bennett. The world wants to mold believers to fit their expectations and believers often disagree on what it means to be Christian witnesses. For us the journey of faith means giving up our fear of the unknown and trusting in the power of Christ to reach in and through us. In addition, it means that faith in Christ has the power to not only save and change us but also our broken world with all its challenges as well. This is the faith we celebrate today around Word and Sacrament for Service. This is Jesus invitation to us "Come." Get involved in a congregation that is willing to take the risk of faith.

Are you dangling above some chaos right now? Truth is that we all have crises of faith from time to time. That is why many of us relate so well to Peter. We all feel alone and unsupported at times. Yet together, we are the people of God who have been called to ministry to and for each other. Christ is truly present with us. Christ is powerful. He is able to catch us, lift us up forgiven and renewed and sends us on our way today to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

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