

Sermon—Proper 14A
Water-Walking Faith
Matthew 14:22-33

How do we grow into water-walking faith? When I examine the quality of my own faith, it often seems more like water-treading than water-walking. Yet take heart! Jesus took the “drownable” water-treading faith of Peter and challenged it to become the bedrock of the Church. The story of Jesus and Peter walking on the water describes a turning point in Peter’s faith development which can parallel our own spiritual growth.

What is happening in this dramatic moment when the disciple’s boat is about to go down in the storm? The disciples are scared to the point of terror. Their circumstances are overwhelming. The wind is against them.

The waves are beating on the boat and flowing over the side.

Jesus is not with them, but He is praying for them back on shore. There is no distance in prayer, right? Yet at this moment, the disciples are not remembering that truth. They feel utterly alone in the middle of a raging storm. All their boating skills could not save them at this moment. Their faith was as shaky as the raging water around them.

The circumstances of our lives can become like the angry sea buffeting the disciples' boat. We too can feel overwhelmed by things beyond our control. A question which can come up for us at a time like this is, "Am I in God's will?" Haven't we often operated on the principle that if something comes easily, it must be in God's will? We call it God's open door policy. We hear it said that if God closes one door, He always opens another.

Sometimes, however, life doesn't flow that easily as we feel ourselves being banged by the

waves against our boats. Are we out of God's will in those circumstances?

We need to remember an important detail of this story. Jesus MADE them get into the boat. It was His will that they be right where they were—in a shaky boat in the middle of a storm.

Why would He do this? Matthew doesn't tell us, but if we consult the Gospel of John, we discover that people were trying to make Jesus King after He fed the 5000. Immediately after the feeding, John (6:15-20) tells us that Jesus withdrew to the mountain to pray and the disciples got into a boat and encountered the night storm also described in today's Gospel.

The point is that Jesus sensed that it was in God's will for Him to turn His back on the popular draft to make Him King.

Jesus also urged His disciples to get out of there because He knew that the disciples would get swept up in the popular fervor.

Thus it was God's will for the disciples to be in that tiny boat tossed about by the wind and the waves. Sometimes when we're in difficult situations which seem overwhelming to us, we're right in the center of God's will. It kept the disciples out of a movement which would have diverted them from Jesus' essential mission.

Jesus didn't want His disciples to be affected by the popular fervor over making Jesus an earthly king because He was teaching them about a different kind of kingship which He would exercise. As we will see by the end of this story, the disciples saw Jesus reveal a different kind of kingly authority over the forces of nature which would cause them to confess, "Truly you ARE the Son of God."

Because Jesus allowed them to be in the boat in the middle of the storm, the disciples learned that Jesus' kingship was far more profound and extensive than any earthly political expression.

This was an experience the memory of which would sustain them through all kinds of future storms in their lives. Facing the adversity of the storm had strengthened their faith to the point of their confessing Jesus as the Son of God. Thus in our own storms, we can admit that God may have us right where He wants us because He wants to reveal a deeper aspect of Himself which will challenge our faith to grow and be strengthened. It is often in the depths of adversity that our faith is forged into a tangible bedrock for our lives.

Let's explore this idea further by taking a look at Peter who is at the center of this story with Jesus.

How do these events challenge and deepen his faith? As we look at Peter, perhaps we can see ourselves.

Along with the rest of the disciples, Peter was terrified when he saw Jesus walking on the water. Peter had been struggling against the

storm. He was facing the very real possibility that he could sink and die out there. Death was very much on the disciples' minds as they screamed upon seeing Jesus. "It is a ghost!" They were scared to death.

At this crucial point, Jesus ministers to the disciples by revealing Himself. "Take heart, it is I; have no fear."

Peter's response to these comforting words was indicative of his faith condition. He wanted to believe that what he was hearing and seeing was real. How could it be proven? It would require risking himself and impetuous Peter was willing to do just that.

"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

What an outlandish request! However, Jesus saw that Peter was willing to have his faith grow through risk. That's what it always takes. So Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to risk himself.

“Come,” Jesus commands and Peter obeys. What a holy moment that was! Peter—totally focused on Jesus, moving over the turbulent water closer and closer to his Lord.

Have you ever had a poignant moment such as this in the midst of a personal crisis? I was present at my father’s side as he lay in the hospital. He had been comatose for two weeks, but I kept talking to him since my training had informed me that people in this condition could still hear words spoken to them.

I was sharing with Dad that he had never taught me to clean fish properly on our fishing trips. He was an expert at this task and left me to clean and load the boat. At that very moment, he rose up in his bed smiled at me and laughed. Then he laid back down on the bed and died. My brothers and sisters, that was a holy moment of faith for me. I was acutely aware that Jesus was there. It was as though Jesus said, “It is I, don’t be afraid!” I was no longer afraid that

Dad's departure would leave me with an overwhelming responsibility for my mother and younger brother. It was a peaceful holy moment.

Peter experienced a moment like this as he walked toward Jesus on the sea. But then the holiness of this moment seemed to evaporate as Peter took his eyes off Jesus and started noting his circumstances. The storm was still there. The waves seemed to get higher and higher. Peter started to sink into the angry sea. At that moment, Peter cried out a foxhole religious prayer. "Lord, save me!" His prayer was immediately answered. Jesus reached out a very real strong hand and pulled Peter up to safety. Yes, Peter discovered that it really was Jesus and not some ghostly figure. Jesus then gently rebuked Peter. "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" Peter's faith was mixed with doubt in this situation, but he still took a giant step in its growth—far beyond what most of us would have dared to risk ourselves. Peter may have had little faith, but Jesus did a great thing with

it. Peter DID walk on the water. Remember, Jesus reminds us that faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains.

What about us? We know that our faith is far from perfect, but there is good news for us. Jesus accepts us where we are.

Sometimes He even allows us to test Him in order to build trust. Ultimately, however, Jesus challenges us to move from where we are into an unknown realm of experience. Like Peter, we have to let go of the boat in order to grow in faith.

What is your boat at this point in your life? Who or what represents security to you? If it is something or someone other than Jesus, let it go!

Even with mixed faith and doubt, Peter did so and his life entered a deeper dimension of intimacy with Jesus as he became the strong human leader the Church would need. In fact,

we have to say that Peter failed his way to success. He failed over and over again to have a perfect bedrock faith in stressful situations, but he grew to fulfill his Jesus-given name—Peter—which in Greek meant “the Rock.”

We aren't any different from Peter. Perhaps we have had some holy moments—such as my last meeting with my father. We sensed the real presence of Jesus and yet in the stress of daily life, the memory dimmed. We became aware once more of the storms surrounding us and our faith seemed to evaporate in doubt. We fail again and again to be the paragon of faith we would like to be. Yet Jesus keeps calling us to let go of the boat again and trust Him. We have felt the rescuing pull of His arms when we have fallen short of that trust, but somehow, even our failures become faith-growing experiences if we keep calling out to Jesus. That's what Peter did. That's how the grace of God works.

Actually our whole journey in faith leads us deeper into a profound worship of Jesus. The end of this story has Jesus in the boat being worshipped by the disciples as the Son of God. As they see Peter rescued from the storm and brought back to the boat, the storm ceases and they are awed by Jesus' authority over the turbulent waters which had threatened to engulf them.

The final goal of water-walking faith is not to see how much we can risk ourselves. The letting go of the boat is not an end in itself, but a means by which we meet Jesus in the midst of the inevitable storms of daily life. There we experience Him reaching out His hand to us, leading us back to the boat. At the end of the story, the boat becomes not so much a symbol of security as it is a gathering place for worship. It is meaningful that the Church is often represented as a boat in Christian symbolism. Like the crew of a boat, we gather to worship Jesus as the Incarnate Son of God. Our faith

grows as we share the voyage through life's ocean depths.

In worship, we come to know Jesus on an ever-deepening level of intimacy, and that is what our faith is all about.