

A Little Faith

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 9, 2020
Friendship Presbyterian Church

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

*Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So, Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."
(Matthew 14:22-33, NRSV)*

Are you the cautious sort? Do you like playing it safe? If you are, I found a group on the internet that you might just love. It's called The Dull Men's Club. I'm not kidding – I couldn't make this up! The Dull Men's Club, www.dullmensclub.com, is a place in cyberspace for guys who feel that they were "born to be mild." It's unclear to me why it's called a *men's* club, as there's nothing about it that dull *women* wouldn't enjoy just as much, too.

Founded a while back, the Dull Men's Club celebrates the aspects of life which some may call boring. It's a forum where folks can share their enthusiasm for such riveting activities as staring at walls, sorting loose change, and watching paint dry. If that describes you, you may qualify to join! The group is made up of thousands of members with colorful hobbies like collecting milk bottles, appreciating roundabouts, and tracking down water pumps.

I don't mean to poke *too* much fun – I mean, I'm the one who obsesses almost every day over whether the apps on my phone are arranged in both a sensible and visually pleasing order. Each of us has our own eccentricities. But it's hard to spend much time on the site without feeling like we've slipped beyond oddness into futility ... beyond quirkiness into not really living in the real world. Certainly no one visiting the site would ever be inspired to throw caution to the wind and leave their comfort zones. For all the amusing strangeness of it, there *is* something about it that makes one think of missed opportunities for living.

Some of the best things in life can only be found after we step beyond our comfort zones and cast aside a bit of caution. I only played a little baseball as a child, but I do know this: ninety feet never seems so long as when you're trying to steal second base. And more than once I was

thrown out trying to steal, but what a feeling in those times I somehow made it. Exhilaration ... Joy ... Relief. The risk was worth it.

Who, governed only by caution, would ever ...

Ride a roller coaster?

Travel to an unfamiliar city?

Start a new business?

Who would ever fall in love?

It takes courage to go where you've never been, to do what you've never done, to take a risk. But only on the other side of those choices is *real and abundant* life.

Our gospel text this morning is all about courage ... about the daily choice we have to hang back in safety or to step out in faith. And from the very beginning of the passage, we can see the *need* for courage. Do you remember the old hymn which assures us that "Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea"? In this reading, Jesus indeed calls to his disciples in the midst of the wild and restless sea, but he's not beckoning them *away* from the storm. Instead, he pushes them *into* it!

The text says that Jesus *made* the disciples get into the boat (14:22). A better translation of this main verb, translated "made" here, would be "to force" or "to compel." Jesus did not give the disciples a choice. He *compelled* them to get into the boat and to leave him alone, so that he could dismiss the gathered crowds and then go up the mountain to pray in solitude.

But while Jesus is alone, deep in solitary prayer, the disciples are in peril on the sea – those disciples whom Jesus *compelled* to get into the boat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and to set out for the other side about 10 miles away! Jesus *made* them set out in the boat, and managed to send them into a raging storm! They must have been alone and terrified, all huddled together, with the threatening waves for hours. They must have been exhausted from being up all night, struggling for their very lives – and all the while, Jesus is nowhere to be found!

Only when their energy reserves are spent, only when all their measures fail, does Jesus reveal himself to them – coming to them, walking on the lake. But the disciples don't initially recognize him. In fact, the text would lead us to believe that they were at least as terrified by seeing him walking on the water towards them as they were by the crashing waves all around! In their exhausted state with the roar of the waves and the spray of the sea drenching their boat, they mistake him for a *ghost*. Given the common perception at the time of the sea as the locus of evil and chaos, it is hard to blame them for mistaking the figure coming towards them for a specter of *death*.

But over their fearful cries, Jesus calls to them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid" (v. 27). Declaring his presence, he declares the *divine* presence, as he echoes the divine name, for the Greek here directly translates not as "It is I", but rather "*I am*" – the name revealed to Moses at

Mount Sinai. "Take heart," Jesus says. "*I am*, do not be afraid." Whether they're ready to believe or not, the disciples are now confronted with the Lord of Heaven and earth.

And so *naturally*, this compels Peter to ask Jesus to command him to come out to him on the water. Naturally! Peter, we know, is impulsive and has a way of speaking before he thinks, but this may top them all. Elsewhere, it's always Peter talking a good game, truly meaning what he says, only to later put his foot in his mouth. But here ... this is different. Peter is willing to put his life on the line.

And so, he asks Jesus to command him to come out on the water, and Jesus does. And so, Peter gets out of the boat, and starts walking on the water, and comes toward Jesus. The text does not say that Jesus calmed the sea to make Peter's steps easier, but he steps out anyway. But then, we know, he takes his eyes off Jesus and notices the strong wind and the crashing waves, and he becomes frightened, and begins to sink, crying out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and catches him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Now, it is customary in interpreting this passage, to pick on Peter for this ... for his impulsiveness in proposing such a hare-brained idea in the first place ... for his losing focus ... for his fear and his "little faith." The gospels – and for that matter, the whole Bible – provide us with many what-you-might-call "good examples of bad examples" ... of what *not* to do or say. Texts involving Pharisees or "Doubting Thomas" immediately spring to mind. And in *every* such case, I want to push back!

Of course, Peter shouldn't have taken his eyes off Jesus and lost focus in the midst of the waves. Of course, he has a *little* faith, as in a small faith, an under-developed faith, a less-than-fully-confident faith, and of course, that's "bad" because we're supposed to have a BIG faith and all that. But then, that's precisely where I get off the Peter-bashing train. And here's why: sure, Peter's faith may be "little", but then, *I don't see any of the other disciples even getting out of the boat!*

"You of little faith." Now, I could stand here and demean "little faith" and challenge us all to BIG faith, but the gospel writer offers us another possibility. In this same gospel, in chapter 17, verse 20, Jesus says, "If you have faith the size of a *mustard seed*, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move." And in the story which immediately precedes this one, five thousand people are fed out of the skeptical disciples presenting Jesus with what food they *did* have ... five loaves and two fish. Their food supply was little and their faith was little, but in the hands of Jesus, you never know what a *little faith* can do.

And on that night, in the midst of the raging sea, *Peter's* faith was *little*, but even a *little faith* was enough for him to step outside the boat in obedience to Jesus' call. A little faith may be little, but in the hands of Jesus, maybe it's all that's needed to transform one story which starts in scarcity into a story which ends in abundance ... and another which starts in terror into one which ends in worship.

How are you, even now, being called to step out of the boat? How are we being called to step out of the boat?

It may sometimes feel like we've been in a boat for a long time now, without any opportunities to leave it. The pandemic has certainly placed limits on our movement and activities, and that has been frustrating. And the outside world – like the sea on which this boat is tossed in our text for this Sunday – is a little scary right now too.

Now one thing we must NOT conclude from this familiar story is that we should all now “step out of the boat” and get back to life as usual. That is NOT what God is calling us to do. COVID-19 is actually a greater threat right now than it was back in April and May, and now is not the time to let up and be careless. Lives are on the line.

But it is always appropriate – and especially appropriate right now in this “time-out” from ordinary life – to ask, How ARE we being called to “step out of the boat”? I don't know what that might mean for you. It's different for each of us. The call comes in big and small ways, every day of our lives: the call to leave our comfort behind and risk trusting, risk loving.

Maybe it means finally forgiving a person who hurt you, taking a first step toward reconciliation—even when it's not your fault!

Maybe it means reaching out to your neighbors and lending a helping hand or a generous ear. Maybe it means learning new skills, or opening your mind, or getting prepared for new shapes of service and ministry when the call to step out – physically – comes.

But stepping out of the boat means something much more too. Beyond our individual lives, for us as the Church of Jesus Christ today, as a community called to embody and share the love and compassion of God, it also must surely mean breaking silence, speaking up, and being counted in these troubled times, in which the very air we breathe in our public discourse in America is polluted with fear and blame and resentment.

All about us we encounter selfishness and irresponsibility being cast as “freedom” ... the crassest conspiracy theories and most brazen lies being confused with Truth. We witness the incessant demonization of the poorest of the poor, refugees fleeing the most hellish conditions on earth, being cast off as invaders and virus-spreaders and criminals and murderers who somehow deserve to have their children taken from them.

We stand and watch the ease with which rightful pride in our country turns into chauvinism ... and how a blind faith in our own national superiority so effortlessly turns into a blindness to systemic injustice and the persistent legacy of racism and white supremacy.

Stepping out of the boat in these days may take many forms, and none of them are easy. But this story promises us that, when in obedience we step out of the boat and on to the stormy waters of life, we can trust that God is with us, and we can trust that God will give us whatever

we need, to do whatever needs to be done. We can also trust that, even when fear gets the best of us and we sink like a stone, God will be there to lift us up.

It's easy to have faith while safely in the boat. But Jesus calls us to try it out on the water. He's walking out there on the stormy seas of life, doing what he always does—loving, feeding, healing, forgiving, standing firm in the truth—and he calls us to do the same. All it takes is a *little faith ...*

To the glory of God. Amen.