

Sunday August 30th, 2020

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious Lord, you are nearer than hands and feet and closer than breathing, yet we are often conscious of a great gap between you and us. Like Jesus' disciples when he left them to ascend the mountain for prayer, we feel ourselves drifting out to sea, lost in a fog of self-doubt. We are glad, O God that you are not only aware of our frailty but ready to come to us in the midst of it. Just as Jesus came down the mountain to minister to his distraught disciples, you come to where we are and minister to us according to our need.

Help us to become as open to our neighbours as you are to us. All too often we have opposed our neighbours in your name. Piling on error upon error, we have confused loyalty to you with pride in our own beliefs. We have accused our neighbours of attacking your altar because they would not worship at ours. We have accused our neighbours of breaking your covenant because they have interpreted it differently from us; and of persecuting your prophets because they did not honour our prophets. Forgive our arrogance, dear Lord, and let us remember him who assured his followers that those who were not against him were with him. Grant us grace to be charitable in passing judgment on others, lest they judge us as narrowly as we judge them.

We pray today for the world's rebels. Some of them are rebels without a cause; illumine them, that they might discover a purpose worthy of their rebellion. Others are rebels for your cause; reassure them, that they might know it is better to be right and fail than to be wrong and succeed. Still others are rebels against your cause; challenge them that they might come to know you as the friend and not the enemy of change.

As we consider those who rebel against you, let us ask why. Did we leave unspoken the sympathetic word that would have inclined them to your word? Or was it the unsympathetic word that we did speak? Did we leave undone the act of kindness that would reveal to them your work in us? Or was it the unkind act that we did perform? Whatever the reason, give us courage to remove any stumbling block that we may have erected between you and your children.

None of us, O God, has strength equal to our need. But you can more than atone for our weakness. Bless us with your presence, guide us with your spirit, and strengthen us with you might. Then we shall not only find strength for our need but need for our strength.

-teachers in preparation

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Matthew 14:22-33
“Lord, if it’s Really You!”

I ran across a great story that John Ortberg tells about a very unique birthday gift his wife decided to give him: a ride in a hot-air balloon. This is how Ortberg tells the story...
We went together to the field where all of the hot-air balloons were inflated, and we met the one other couple we would go up with. We told them what we did for a living, and they told us what they did for a living. Then we got into the basket, and the pilot began the balloon’s ascent.

It was beautiful. It was scenic. This was southern California, and we could look out over the hills and see all the way to the ocean. It was a majestic sight. I was inspired and excited. But I experienced one other emotion I hadn’t anticipated: fear. The balloon basket went up about knee high. One good lurch and you would be right out of there. My palms were sweating, my heart was pounding, and I was gripping the ropes.

I thought I was the most frightened person in the basket until I looked over at my wife! I decided I would like to get to know something about the guy who was flying this balloon. I could’ve tried to psych myself up into thinking everything was going to work out great. I could’ve tried to cultivate a positive mental attitude, chanting, “I believe; I believe; I believe.” But we had placed our destinies in his hands; our lives rested on the competence and character of the man piloting the balloon.

So I inched over toward him and asked, “What do you do for a living? How did you get started flying balloons?” I was hoping he would say something like he was a neurosurgeon, that he started flying hot-air balloons because he used to be an astronaut and he missed flying. I knew we were in trouble when his response began with, “Well, it’s like this dude.”

He didn’t actually have a job, he said; mostly he surfed. He began flying hot-air balloons after he was driving his pickup truck and had too much to drink. He had gotten into a rather bad accident and had injured his brother, who was no longer able to get along too well. He started flying hot-air balloons to give his brother something to watch. Then he said, “If, when we descend, the descent is bumpy, it’s because I’ve never flown this particular balloon before.

I’m not quite sure how it’s going to go when we go down.” My wife said to me, “You mean we’re a thousand feet up in the air with an unemployed surfer who started flying balloons because he was driving his pickup truck and got drunk and crashed it and crippled his brother, and he has never been in this balloon before, and doesn’t know how to get it down?”

The other couple had not spoken a word this whole flight. Now the wife speaks for the only time during the journey. She said to me, “You’re a pastor. Do something religious!” So, I took up an offering. Ortberg’s story raises a really important point for all of us; can we trust the pilot?

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You see we all live on this great big balloon we call the earth, spinning around the sun. Every day, in every culture, and every land; people wake up and ask the crucial question of life, “Is there anyone piloting this thing and if so, can that pilot be trusted?” It seems to me that we live in a world where people are trying really hard to psych themselves up, chanting, I believe, I believe, I believe,” over and over again to themselves.

What sociologists tell us is that people have begun, on mass, to put their faith in faith. They tell themselves: “If only I just believe hard enough.” But it is all a game. The real issue is, “Is somebody piloting this thing, and can that somebody be trusted?” Are his competence and his character such that I can, with confidence place my destiny in his hands?” That requires true faith. And faith is always and ultimately connected to risk.

In fact, there can be no faith without risk and yes, sometimes failure. That brings us to today’s gospel lesson about Peter in the boat. Now we know from the story that Jesus, after feeding the multitude, desires that alone time he was trying to get the day before. He sends his disciples on ahead by boat, while he goes off alone to pray. While crossing the Sea of Galilee a nasty storm arises.

The wind is howling, and the rain is pelting the open fishing boat; it is quite frightening, even for these seasoned fishermen. At somewhere in the fourth watch, or between 3 and 6 am, suddenly Jesus comes walking across the water. It is no wonder the disciples were frightened. They are: cold, wet, exhausted, terrified, and now this figure comes walking across the water towards them.

It is under these terrifying conditions that Peter is about to climb out of the boat and try and walk on the water. I would think it impossible to get out of a boat, and walk on the water on a perfectly calm day, but in a raging storm. That would take about as much courage or foolishness as anyone can muster. Now as we know Peter steps out and everything is okay for a moment; he is actually standing on the water.

However, the storm gets the best of him and he begins to sink. His faith fails him. So, it would seem that this story is a story about failure. Or is it? Raise your hand if you have ever: failed a test, or been cut by a sports team, been denied a job promotion, become impatient with a three year old and said something you regretted, if you’ve ever said or did the wrong thing, or been a failure at some point in your life?

All of us then are “would-be water walkers.” And what might surprise you to discover is that God never intended human beings to go through life in a desperate attempt to avoid failure. You see, in this story of the storm and the boat, the boat is the safe place. Despite the storm, the boat is as secure as you can be on the water. The water is high, the waves rough, the wind strong, and the night dark. The storm is out there, and if you get out of your boat, you might sink.

However, if you don’t get out of your boat, you will never walk, because if you want to walk on the water, you’ve got to first get out of the boat. I know that in each of us there is something that tells us our lives are meant for more than sitting in the boat.

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There is something that calls us to leave the routine, comfortable existence, and abandon ourselves in this adventure of following Jesus. In the story, Jesus comes to his disciples who are in the boat. The disciples see him walking on the sea, and they are terrified. Jesus says to them, "Have no fear. It's me." He is saying in essence, "You can trust my character and my confidence. You can safely without reservation, with no hesitation, place your life in my hands.

You have this storm but you also have me. Recognize which is more powerful." Considering this, Peter says, "All right, Lord. If it is really you, what do you want me to do? Command me." Jesus says, "All right Peter, out of the boat." So, Peter lifts one leg over the side of the boat. He puts his foot on the water, then the other foot. Then he lets go of the boat, and he turns and walks toward Jesus.

For the first time in human history, an ordinary, mortal man is walking on water. Then all of a sudden, Peter realizes what he is doing; he sees the waves; he feels the sting of the water. And his faith gives way; he is afraid again, and he sinks. Now we ask this important question: did Peter fail? How you answer that question, says a great deal about how you view the ups and downs of your life.

You see, failure is not so much an event, as it is the way we interpret an event. It is the label we attach to it. For example; Jonas Salk attempted 200 unsuccessful vaccines for polio, before he came up with one that worked. Somebody asked him, "How did it feel to fail 200 times trying to invent a vaccine for polio?" Salk's response was this: "I never failed 200 times at anything in my life. My family taught me to never use that word. I simply discovered 200 ways how not to make a vaccine for polio.

Did Peter fail? Well, yes, in one sense. His faith gave way. He could not stay locked on to Jesus. He sank. He failed. But here is something we always seem to overlook; were there not eleven other bigger failures on the boat? They failed privately. They failed quietly. Their failure was safe, unnoticed, and un-criticized. Only Peter experienced the shame of public failure, and it is only him we think of in this passage.

But what we forget is that only Peter knew the glory of walking on the water. And only Peter knew, in a way that the others never would, that when he sank, Jesus would be there; that Jesus was wholly adequate to save. Peter shared a moment, a connection that nobody else could have. They could not, because they never got out of the boat.

Now the critical consideration for us today; what do you think it means for you to get out of the boat? It sounds exciting, and you might even be up for it, but what does it mean? At the very heart of it, is our decision to become a disciple of Jesus. A disciple is not simply someone who believes certain things, so he or she will get into heaven some day when they die.

A true disciple is someone who says, "It is my ultimate goal to live the way Jesus would live if he were in my body." A non-disciple is somebody who has any other goal for their lives. You cannot drift through life hoping to become a disciple; you must choose.

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If you want to choose your next step as one out of the boat, it will look different than everyone else, because we are all created to be unique and we all need to learn different things. Talk about unique; do you remember a seamstress who was a member of Dexter Avenue Baptist, and a devoted follower of Christ. Rosa Parks was someone who believed that Jesus never intended the world to be segregated by race, creed or colour.

One morning, Rosa Parks stepped out of her boat. In December 1955, Rosa got on her usual bus for her trip home from work. She was very tired. The driver told her that she had to go to the back of the bus because she was African American, and a white person might need the seat she occupied. In one of the most courageous choices in the twentieth century, Rosa Parks refused to move.

Without intending it, Rosa Park's started a revolution. The next Monday night 10,000 people gathered at her church to pray and to ask God, "What do we do next?" Because of Rosa Park's choice to get out of her boat, the whole civil rights movement was launched. It was a terrible struggle, because some people were imprisoned and some even died, but the conscience of a nation had been changed.

Now I must mention one aspect of discipleship that none of us likes to talk about, including myself. And that is that no matter how committed to Christ we become, there remains this constant presence of fear. The disciples were not immune to fear. The storm, the picture of Jesus walking on the water, and when Peter gets out of the boat, he gets what eventually; that's right, more fear.

What we observe in Peter is that this will not be the last occurrence in which he encounters monumental fear. Getting out of the boat, and growing in Christ, means encountering new territory. Every time you encounter new territory, you experience fear. But here is the hard thing to accept; discipleship comes down to a choice multiple times in our lives. The choice we face is this; do I want comfort or do I want fear?

To be a disciple of Jesus is to renounce comfort. That's too bad for us, because our society is obsessed with comfort. We like to, come home and just "veg out"-usually in front of the television. People are becoming what we call couch potatoes. This is not good training for discipleship. The eleven disciples were "boat potatoes." They did not want to run the risk. They did not want to experience any more fear.

Dare I be so bold as to suggest that maybe the church is full of "pew potatoes"; people whose religious faith amounts to nothing more than spiritual padding that will add comfort to their lives? Pew potatoes have a really nice boat. Perhaps they haven't been out of it in a long time. Maybe there was a time when you stepped out of your boat regularly but it's been a while since you responded to Christ invitation to come to him where he is.

Walking on the water is about coming to Jesus, and if you try it you may sink. But the secret is: it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because Jesus is adequate to save sinking people.

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The point is not that Jesus will instantly, always bail people out. It is that he is always ready to respond.

There is no failure that can place you beyond the loving care of the hand of God. Did you notice something that often gets overlooked in this story? As a result of Peter getting out of the boat, and as a result of his failure and the redeeming hand of Christ, those in the boat worshipped Christ. When people get out of the boat, the power of God is put into play and remarkable things happen.

Imagine what would happen if everyone in this room decided right now that they wanted to get out of their boat. What if everybody were to say, "Jesus command me. I'm yours." Can you imagine the kind of power of God that would be released in this community and this nation?

Jesus is out there looking for people to get out of their boats. If you go, you will face problems. A storm is out there. Your faith will not be perfect, and you will sink. But I also know two other things. I know that when you fail-and you will-Jesus will be there. He will pick you up. He will not leave you alone. And I know that every once in a while, you are going to walk on water.