

“Get Out of the Boat!”
Matthew 14:22-33
September 10, 2017
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One of my college professors was a biblical scholar, Dale Bruner. Dr. Bruner was a brilliant guy. He used to begin each class by reading the New Testament text and opening in a prayer based on the text. But he never used the English version, he always read to us from the Greek text of the New Testament and he would just translate in his head as he went along. Later, after struggling for three years with Greek, I came to realize what a feat that was. When I had his class, he was in the middle of writing a book on the Gospel of Matthew, and so he used us as sort of a sounding board for the section that he happened to be writing at the time. I remember that one of the issues we discussed ^{was} ~~what~~ that of miracles. Dr. Bruner had no problem with the idea that Jesus could do miracles. I mean, if he was really Immanuel, God-with-us, as Matthew says, he could do practically anything he wanted, right? But this miracle gave him problems. He didn't understand this one. The walking on the water was a problem for him. Every other miracle had a purpose, Dr. Bruner told us. Except this one. Every other miracle that Jesus did was for the good of someone else. He healed people's illnesses, the blind could suddenly see, the lame could walk. He fed 5000 hungry people, he calmed a storm that was about to swamp the boat that his friends were in. Every miracle helped people—except this one. Why would he do this? What's the purpose of walking on the water? It sort of seems like showing off, don't you think? Look what I can do! It doesn't help anybody. No one gets healed. No demons exorcised. No one gets fed. It's just Jesus walking on the water. Why would he do that? Is he showing off? I don't think so. I think he is doing something important. In fact, I think that there is purpose to this miracle and that he's not just showing off. Part of it has to do with water. The last few weeks have shown us the power of hurricanes, obviously—the news of Harvey and Irma has taken up a lot of our attention. But it's not just the storm, the wind, but it's the water. The amount of rain that fell in Texas was more destructive than the wind. It's the storm surge, the waters of flood that is the most dangerous

thing about the storm in Florida. Far more damage comes from water, from the floods, than from anything else. Have you ever been out on a ship at sea? Did you ever think about the amount of water that is there? The water that is underneath you? The sea, which we might think of as the waters or the deep have strong connotations in the Bible. If you were to think of the sea as 'the deep' it might give you a clue as to how the disciples are thinking of the water. What lies below is unknown, threatening, and maybe even a little chaotic. This is the sea which Jesus is walking on, the deep threatening waters that lie below.

If you think back to the very first story in the Bible, the account of creation in Genesis, the story tells us that the spirit of God moved across the waters of the deep, contemplating creation. In the ancient world, in the ancient mind, the waters represent the chaos of what was there before creation. When God spoke, the waters drew back. "The waters represent the nothingness of *uncreation*. The waters also represent the chaos which threatens to break through into the order of God's creation. The story tells us how God made a space between the waters above and the waters below and that it was in this space, the 'in between space', that God makes all things.

So, in the Old Testament we are given an image of God drawing back the waters and holding back these waters, the waters above and the waters below, which threaten to undo the creation. The Bible goes on to remind us of the destructive powers of these waters in the great flood of Noah, the waters wipe the slate clean so things can start again. Now in Jesus walking on the waters, over the deep, Jesus demonstrates his power over these forces which threaten life and creation itself."¹ Maybe that's why Jesus does this. Not to show off, but to show us who he is. Not to show off his power, but to affirm to the disciples that he has power over the chaos of the waters and that he has power over any chaos in our lives. Walking on the water is a promise to us that with him, we can handle anything that comes along. And so he encourages Peter to get out of the boat. This has been a favorite image for preachers for

generations. Some will say that Peter was foolish to get out of the boat, that this was a sign of his pride and recklessness and that because one of the common images of the church is a boat, that we should stay in the boat lest we start to sink. Other preachers focus on the fact that Peter gets out of the boat, but when he starts to notice the wind and the waves, when he takes his eyes off of Jesus, he starts to sink. So keep your eyes on Jesus. Both of those are good lessons, but I can't help thinking about what Peter experienced. Of course the disciples were frightened by seeing Jesus walk on the water. But once they became sure it was him, Peter asks him to let him come out on the water too. Can you imagine? "Jesus let me walk on water too!" Can you imagine getting out of a boat? Can you imagine thinking that you too could walk on water? That's crazy! But Jesus says "Sure, c'mon!" Jesus encourages him. He doesn't say, "No, Peter, it is safest to stay with your brethren, it is important for you all to stay together in the boat." He doesn't say, "Sure Peter, but be careful, keep your eyes on me or you'll start to sink!" No, he just says, "Come on. Get out of the boat." And so Peter gets out of the boat. And he steps out on the water. That's crazy, that's incredible! He's walking on water! He's doing something that everyone knows is impossible to do. But with Jesus it is possible.

But then he starts to sink. Of course Jesus rescues him and they get back in the boat. That's when Jesus says, O you of little faith, why did you doubt? Who does he say that to? Does he say that to Peter who took his eyes off of Jesus? Does he say that to all of them who doubted that it was really him, thinking he was a ghost? Or does he say that to the eleven disciples who stayed in the boat, who never took a risk, and so never felt the exhilaration of doing something that everyone knows is impossible.

What about you? Would you have the faith to get out of the boat? To do something that you know is crazy, or impossible? What about us? Is God out there, saying, "C'mon, get out of the boat?" What would it mean for us to have enough faith to step out of the boat?

Clif Kirkpatrick, former stated clerk of our denomination has said, "The reason we seem to lack faith is that we are not doing anything that requires it."² This church does lots of wonderful things. As

Christians, individuals in this church do lots of wonderful things. But do we do anything that requires really crazy faith? As Fredrick Buechner, Presbyterian pastor and author says, "My question is this: Are there in us, in you and me now, that recklessness of the loving heart, that wild courage, that crazy gladness in the face of darkness and death, that shuddering faithfulness even unto the end of the world, though with the new things can come to pass?"³ Do we have that kind of faith? Do we do anything that gets us to step out of the boat?

Wil Wilmon, United Methodist pastor and scholar writes about the call for the church to do something risky that requires faith.

"And that's how you will know Jesus. Jesus is the one who extravagantly, recklessly, commands you to leave the safety of the boat, to step into the sea, to test the waters, and show what your faith is made of. That's Jesus.

I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story today implies if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea, you have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture." And this is not easy. It takes faith. It takes what may seem crazy. It takes what will be hard. The day after the horror of September 11, I saw this couple being interviewed on the news. They were standing on the street, before the wreckage of ground zero, obviously in great grief. Their beloved daughter had perished in the cataclysm. Through tears, they shared their grief with the reporter.

The reporter, stammering, said to them, "Well, I know that you will be able to go to your place of worship this weekend and there maybe you'll find some consolation in your faith...."

And the grieving mother replied, "No, we won't be going to our place of worship this weekend 'cause we're Christians, and we know what Jesus commands about forgiveness, and frankly, we're just not yet ready for that. It'll be some time before we'll want to be with Jesus."

Wow. There's a couple who knows, really knows, what Jesus looks like and what being his followers looks like.⁴

What would it be for you? Volunteering with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance because you know events like the last two weeks will happen again. Or maybe just forgiveness—letting go of that grudge that you have harbored for years—maybe that feels like you're about to take a step out on to water. Teaching Sunday School? Working serving lunch to the poor? Working for a “political” cause, just because you feel your faith calls you to speak out? Speaking honestly, lifting up the truth, even when it doesn't make you look good, but speaking the truth just because that's the way it really is? What would it be for you? What would it be for us as a church? Trying something new even though, “we've never done it that way before?” Trying to do something because we think God calls us even though it might be costly? Even though it might risk losing money, or losing members? What does God call us to? What would be getting out of the boat for us? The session of our church and the deacons meet this week. What will they talk about? Will they spend their time listening for the voice of Jesus, discerning what he is calling us to do? Or will they talk about the same old things in the same old ways with the same old ideas? Or will they put their feet into the water? Or will you? When you go into the Gull Prairie Room in a few minutes, will you grab your coffee and look for your friends? Or will you do something different? Will you listen, will you look?

So if in the dead of night, or maybe just before dawn, you should hear a voice, calling your name, a strange voice calling you to rise up, to sail forth, to risk the storm, to defy the waves, there is a good chance that voice could belong to none other than the one who is your very Lord and Savior. Who would dare to call an ordinary, not very spectacularly faithful person like you to such high adventure, to such risk and such struggle?

I think you know who. But will you step out of the boat?