

S St. Paul's Congregational Church, August 13, 2017  
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 August 13, 2017; Matthew 14:22-33 – 14A  
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Our gospel story continues immediately following the feeding of the 5,000 – it had been a long day for Jesus, mourning the death of his cousin, John the Baptist – he couldn't go off and be by himself and grieve - the crowds followed him, clamored for his attention, wanted to be with him. And then came the challenge of feeding them all – not just in body but spirit too. The miracle of the loaves and fishes.

Finally the crowds are gone, Jesus puts the disciples on a boat, and sends them ahead of him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Finally – he can be alone with his thoughts and he goes up on a nearby mountain to pray.

While Jesus is praying, the disciples are paddling – right into a storm at sea - the wind blows against them. The waves are crashing. They struggle all night against the storm, working as hard as they can to make it to the other side. It's 4:00 in the morning – they are cold. Wet. Exhausted. Afraid for their lives – it wouldn't be the first time that a boat ventured across these waters, never to be heard from again. At this hour they've had just about all they can take. They're battered, seasick – hands blistered from their struggle against the storm. It doesn't look good.

But one of the disciples looks up and there amidst the mist and clouds he sees a figure coming closer on the dark and treacherous waves. As if the storm wasn't scary enough, it looks like a ghost is walking toward them on the whitecaps. Jesus senses their fear and quickly identifies himself – “Don't be afraid – it's me.”

Yesterday the storm got very real and personal to me – it was stunning, heartbreaking, when as I was writing, I turned on the TV and saw the face of one of our own, the Rev. Traci Blackmon, United Church of Christ Executive Minister for Justice and Witness, being interviewed on MSNBC on the streets of Charlottesville. The night before she had been speaking at a prayer service when white nationalist, white supremacist protestors surrounded the church with torches – and as I watched her speak, suddenly violence erupted around her, she was being pulled away to safety, and the connection was broken. But not before we saw demonstrators attacking with bats, brass knuckles, throwing bottles – it was incredibly frightening, hearing her say, with great urgency in her voice, “We gotta go! We gotta go!” It seemed longer than it actually was before she was back on the phone again, telling Joy Reid that she was safe and that her colleagues in ministry who had been separated in the melee had been located and were safe as well.

The storm is raging around Jesus' disciples as they battle the fierce waves. They are afraid. The storm continues to rage for disciples today around tensions in Korea, in Gwam – people are afraid. The storm continues to rage in Bloomington, Minnesota as a mosque is bombed. The storm continues to rage on the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia, as waves of violence erupt as white nationalists battle counter protestors,

including clergy. We watched a car plow into people on the streets. We are afraid – the storm is raging around Jesus’ disciples today.

Jesus comes to Peter, comes to us, amid the storms, reaches out his hand and says, “Don’t be afraid. It’s me. Come. Come onto the water.”

Now, if I’m in a boat being battered by waves, seasick, tired, soaking wet, cold, the last place I would think to ask is to go out of the boat into the water – much less onto the water, in the midst of that terrifying storm. I couldn’t help but wonder yesterday, what would it be like to stand next to Traci Blackmon on those dangerous streets, walk onto the water there in Charlottesville?

Peter was Jesus’ committed disciple – not just a disciple who sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to his teachings. It’s much more than that – a disciple wanted to DO what the teacher did. A disciple wanted to TALK like the teacher did. WALK like the teacher WALKed. Peter, when he asks to walk on water with Jesus, wants to do what his teacher is doing. Jesus is walking on the whitecaps, Peter wants to as well. We’re called to walk on those whitecaps too.

Let’s also pay attention, though to the fact that Peter just doesn’t jump out of the boat and start walking – he knows that if he’s going to do something as impossible as walking on water, it will be because Jesus calls him. And if Jesus calls him, it’s a given that Jesus will make the impossible possible. So Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, please call me to come to you on the water. Call me to do what you are doing. Call me to be like you.” And Jesus simply tells Peter, “Come. Walk to me.”

Jesus calls us as well to do what seems impossible. Jesus tells us, “Come. Walk to me. You can do it!”

Peter takes the risk, leaves the boat, tries the impossible at Jesus’ command. He’s bold. He takes a couple steps on the water. But then the wind comes up again. Whitecaps break over his feet. He loses his nerve and begins to sink.

We can only imagine his fear as he cries out, “Lord, save me!” And Jesus does – Jesus reaches down. Catches him. Pulls him into the boat. But even as he rescues him, he asks him, “Why did you doubt?”

Peter and each of us have so much in common, don’t we. We want to be disciples – but we lose our nerve too. Maybe Jesus is calling you, calling me, to do something impossible. But the wind has picked up and doubt is creeping in and we feel like we’re sinking. But Jesus is there, holding out his hand to us too.

The storms of life rage around us and in us: our children get sick, our parents are aging and losing their abilities, we have decisions to make about jobs, careers, financial struggles; around the world and in the news we are concerned about escalation between the US and North Korea, we watch appalled at the demonstrations, the carnage, and what they represent on the streets of Charlottesville. The storm just doesn’t quit, does it.

Maybe you’ve jumped into the unknown and now you feel like you’re way in over your head. Or maybe you’ve heard the call of Jesus to do something new and bold, but you’re afraid to get out of the boat in the first place. Same thing happens to churches too.

But here’s the good news: Jesus is there in the shadows, in the storm, hand outstretched, to give strength, courage, help – all we have to do is put our own hand.

I know I’ve been there – and so have you. It’s at those times when my prayer is, I can’t do this God. You have to. And God has never let me down. Jesus takes my hand

and leads me, walks with me – even with those moments of doubt – which are certainly only human.

Doubt isn't the opposite of faith: fear is.

We are all called, aren't we. How do we respond?

How do we respond in the ordinary days of our lives? We're not all called as Traci Blackmon is called – but Jesus is calling us amidst our ordinary lives – sometimes stormy times, sometimes in what we might consider routine decisions, even in the good times. Jesus is calling us to a richer, more joyfilled, peaceful life than we can imagine – especially when we're in the midst of storms. And Jesus is present for us – always – we can count on that!

Let's all remember this: Jesus said, "You didn't choose me. I chose you." Yes, we strive to have faith in Jesus, we gathered here today want to have faith in Jesus – we do our best to listen for his call, respond to his call – but the extraordinary gift to remember is this: Jesus has faith in us.

Jesus doesn't call us to do something that he didn't think we could do with his strength. He's called us to be like him, to be his disciples, to do as he does. Do we really want to be like Jesus? Peter did. So much so that he was willing to jump out of the safety of the boat on the raging sea.

Jesus can work with that.

And Jesus can work with us too – what a blessing, what a promise, what a joy – what grace we are given. Jesus has called us, both as individuals and as church. Jesus has faith in us. We need each other. We must not underestimate the power of church, of community to save lives in simple yet profound ways: we must step up, speak out. Love always conquers hate! Always!

Jesus calls us to step up and look out for each other: we must! In the ordinary and extraordinary days of our lives.

In 1995 a killing heat wave left 739 people dead in Chicago. Afterward, people wondered what lessons could be learned that might save people in a similar, future heat emergency. Chicago is a large city but it is often called a town because it consists of many small neighborhoods where people of various economic and ethnic backgrounds live. One thing was obvious after the disaster: many of the deaths took place in the poorest neighborhoods, where there was little or no air conditioning. Air conditioning saved lives. This shouldn't surprise anyone but did this mean that those who were poor were automatically doomed to suffer more?

Scientists looked at two communities, Englewood and Auburn Gresham, side by side in Chicago's South Side, which had similar poverty and similar ethnic backgrounds. But: Englewood had one of the highest death rates, while Auburn Gresham one of the lowest.

What happened? The answer was surprisingly simple: people were outside on the sidewalks of Auburn Gresham. There were stores in their community and local people shopped there. There were restaurants, community centers, and – very important – churches. All this meant that people went to places where they recognized each other, knew each other, and, if someone wasn't there, they missed them! During the heat wave people in Auburn Gresham checked on each other. Church members looked in on other church members. If folks in the community had no air conditioning, needed food or fresh water, or were struggling medically, someone else knew about it and took action.

In contrast people who lived in places like Englewood had no stores or restaurants or community centers. People stayed inside at home, and they did not know each other. No one checked on those who were really suffering. Now, that's a tragedy, isn't it.

The truth is, being church, being community, being concerned and caring about each other saves lives. As Jesus extends a hand to each of us, we're called to extend a hand to others. As in Auburn Gresham when someone reached out a hand for help, the community responded! There was someone there to lift them up! I'm convinced that we at St. Paul's are called to respond, extending our hands to others – our community, our neighborhoods, our world needs us amid all the storms raging around us. We must respond!

The storms do continue to rage and will continue to rage – but Jesus is with us now and always will be, telling us not to be afraid, holding out his hand, lifting us up. So let us stand together and take action - as individuals and as church – certain that God is with us – let us live with courage, joy, and thanksgiving for God's amazing grace. Love always conquers hate! So may it be.

Amen.