

A Little Faith is Enough Faith: Matthew 14:22-33

Norwalk Christian Church, August 10, 2014, Year A, Proper 14

In all my life, I have never seen as many people in one place as I saw yesterday at the Iowa State Fair. Great multitudes that put to shame the multitude from last week's story! The line to see the butter cow alone was udderly amazing. And there was no need for a feeding miracle at the State Fair. Had Jesus told the disciples to feed these multitudes, the problem wouldn't have been finding food, it'd be deciding what food to get. Everywhere you turn, there is food. Food I didn't even know existed. Food I didn't even know could be fried. There was something to eat on a stick for everyone

Now, I'm not trying to diminish the ministry of Jesus, but I get why he was more than ready to send the Disciples and the crowds away. 7 hours yesterday around the State Fair multitudes was enough for me! I couldn't wait to be back in quiet Norwalk, sitting on my back porch, gazing at the peaceful farm across the road.

And just as I was settling in, that's when it hit me. The guilt. Guilt over all that was eaten, and how deep fried it was. For every calorie burned walking the fairway, 50 were consumed from a stick. I actually ate a big chunk of pepperjack cheese on a stick, covered in batter, and deep fried in grease. It was so, so wrong, but it felt so, so right.

If that is not guilt enough, here we go and read this story. While some may find comfort from a story like this, that Jesus will help us walk upon the storms of life, it just leaves me feeling guilty. When I hear "You of little faith", I know he's talking to me.

Perhaps you've heard the sermon before. I grew up hearing it. The preacher would read the text we just read, then enter into a long diatribe about how we, the faithful congregation, didn't have enough faith. "Ye of little faith", he'd point his fingers at us and say (and it was always a he, wasn't it?). It felt like he was pointing straight at me. "If only you had more faith when the storms came, then you would not sink! If you only you had more faith, then you would not doubt!" If only you wouldn't eat so much deep fried food on a stick...

The sermon never succeeded in increasing my faith, but it always increased my guilt.

Guilt seems to be the norm for Christians. The standard for the Christian life always seems so high that's it's almost insurmountable. If only we prayed more. If only we trusted in God more. If only we didn't have so many doubts. But we do. We struggle. We question. When trouble comes, we are distracted and we take our eyes off Jesus and begin to sink.

"You of little faith, why did you doubt?" If Peter is "of little faith", then we are "of even littler faith". And so we stay in the boat, if we ever got on the boat in the first place.

The disciples only get on the boat because, as Matthew puts it, Jesus made them do it. He compels the disciples to get in the boat to cross the sea ahead of him, and while he stays there and sends the people away so he can finally have his quiet time.

Immediately after the disciples are away from Jesus, trouble arises, and blows them out to sea, as the wind beats down on the boat. While Jesus enjoys the quiet, the disciples hang on all night for dear life. But they are experienced fishermen, so they handle it. They've been here before.

Not long ago, they were in another storm, one much worse than this one. Jesus was in the boat with them that time, but he was sleeping through it! Overcome with fear, they wake him up. Do something, Jesus! So Jesus does. He rebukes the wind and the waves, and the storm ceases.

But today, Jesus is no longer in the boat. It's just them. But they got this. They're not afraid...well, not yet. As morning begins to break, they look across the horizon, and they see something--or is it someone?? It's a ghost! This, not the storm, terrifies them, and they cry out in fear. It's often what we don't know, the unfamiliar, the unexplained, that scares us the most.

The ghost begins to speak to them: "Take heart. It is I" or, literally, "Take heart. I am. Do not be afraid." It must be Jesus! But Peter needs proof. "If it's you, Lord, then command me to come to you on the water." Why this is what will convince Peter, I do not know. Does he know something about Jesus that we do not? Is the only authentic Jesus the one that compels us out of the safety of the boat, as we step out in faith onto the turbulent sea?

Whatever the reason, the ghost-like Jesus says, "Come," and Peter climbs out and begins walking on the water. And you know the rest of the story. Outside the safety of the boat, the storm seems much more terrifying, and he begins to sink. "Lord, Save me!" Immediately, Jesus reaches down, and pulls him out. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Cue the guilt, people of little faith. But is guilt the right response to this story?

"Little faith" is a phrase Jesus uses throughout Matthew's gospel, five times, in fact. And each time, it's a phrase spoken to the disciples, to those who have left everything to follow Jesus. The final time it's used in chapter 17, a few steps from our text this morning. Jesus follows that use by telling his little-faith disciples that if they "had faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." Little faith can move mountains.

Which got me thinking....How should we read Jesus' words to Peter? Is Jesus speaking sternly to him, with a hint of disappointment, "Oh Peter, you have little faith! If only you had more, then you would not doubt!"

Or, is it, "Peter, you have a little faith! Why did you doubt? The little faith you have is faith enough to move mountains and waves!"

How much faith does it take to walk on water? How much faith is enough? And is faith and doubt a zero-sum game? If you have a little doubt, does that mean you can have no faith? And if you have faith, does that mean you will never have doubt?

Earlier this week, Mike Davis and I were reflecting on a gentleman we met on the CYF mission trip, named Jeff. Jeff led the Discipleship program at the Union Gospel Mission in St. Paul. This program was their recovery arm, a live-in program for men seeking to overcome the addictions in their life.

Jeff, himself, was a graduate of the program he now led, and it was from that place of his own victory that he could help lead others down the same road. What a great example of faith! But as we talked to Jeff, he told us that the last time he went through recovery wasn't the first time, nor was it the second time. It was the 9th time. 9 times he stepped out of the boat, seeking to overcome the storms around him. 8 times he sank. One time he walked on water.

We asked him what made the 9th time different? Did he not have enough faith the other 8 times? His answer was simple: the 9th time I finally wanted it. I finally wanted to be made well.

A little faith is enough faith. Enough faith to stand up from failure, and try again.

Last week, Dr. Kent Brantley, the doctor who contracted Ebola while treating ebola patients in Liberia, was brought to a hospital in Atlanta. Dr. Brantley graduated from Abilene Christian University, where I went to seminary, and our times overlapped. Many of my friends were his friends. He's just an ordinary guy...yet, now his life is international news.

A few days ago Dr. Brantley released a statement. "I am writing this update from my isolation room at Emory University Hospital," he begins.

Later he writes, "My wife Amber and I, along with our two children, did not move to Liberia for the specific purpose of fighting Ebola. We went to Liberia because we believe God called us to serve [God] at ELWA Hospital.

"One thing I have learned is that following God often leads us to unexpected places. When Ebola spread into Liberia, my usual hospital work turned more and more toward

treating the increasing number of Ebola patients. I held the hands of countless individuals as this terrible disease took their lives away from them. I witnessed the horror firsthand, and I can still remember every face and name.

He ends this way, “Now... I am in a totally different setting. My focus, however, remains the same—to follow God. As you continue to pray for Nancy and me, yes, please pray for our recovery. More importantly, pray that we would be faithful to God’s call on our lives in these new circumstances.”

A little faith is enough faith. He didn’t need the faith to fight an ebola outbreak and an infection of his own. All he needed was a little faith, enough to begin the journey.

It’s time we clear up a long-held misunderstanding. Faith does not equal belief. Faith has nothing to do with certainty. Faith and doubt have always co-existed, and always will. Faith is risky. Faith is uncertain. Faith is stepping out of the boat, onto the sea, when you believe that human beings cannot walk on the water.

Faith is saying, Jesus, I don’t have it all figured out. I may have never have it figured out. But something compels me to follow you onto the water, against my better judgment...and so I will.

Christ doesn’t promise that we will never sink, or fall, or get sick, or that we will ever stop letting our doubts distract us. Faith is not perfection. The promise is that when we do sink, then Jesus will be right there, not with words of judgment and guilt, but with words of love, pulling us back up, as we give it another try.

A little faith is enough faith. It is all you need. Don’t doubt yourself. Guilt has no place here. Just take that step, and get ready for the adventure of a lifetime. Amen.