

²²Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

On the left side of the sanctuary in my home church in Cokato, there are two stained glass windows that pick up the morning sun and diffuse colored light throughout the sanctuary. The one towards the front near the pulpit is the larger of the two, depicting a 12-year old Jesus talking with the priests in the Jerusalem temple. I am always grateful that the leading on that window is very strong, for my childhood friends and I know from experience that it is able to withstand an errant punt from the football games we used to play on the side lawn.

Further back in the sanctuary, just under the balcony, back in the area where Mary Pestel's parents, Carlton and Lorraine, used to sit, there is a smaller window depicting our gospel reading this morning. What you see in the window is that moment when Peter begins to sink in the water and he calls out to Jesus to save him.

When we read this story of Jesus walking on the sea (notice that I don't say "walking on the water", but walking on the sea – I'll say more about that in a moment) – when we read this story of Jesus walking on the sea, I would guess that most people if asked to identify the key characters in the story would say "Jesus and Peter". Most sermons I have heard on this story focus on Peter's risk taking – getting out of the boat, keeping his eyes on Jesus and trusting Jesus to save him despite all evidence to the contrary – seeing that as a positive example of Christian discipleship.

There's another way to understand the truth of this story for us, but to do so we have crop the picture differently. If you have worked with digital photos on a computer, you know what cropping is. Cropping allows you to focus on just one portion of a larger picture. If you had a picture of my face, you could crop the picture to see only my left eye. The stained-glass window in my home church has been cropped to show just Jesus and Peter. What has been cut out of the picture? The boat and the other eleven disciples.

I'd like to suggest to you this morning that the truth of this story cannot be fully understood without the disciples in the boat. But before I get to that, I want to point out three elements of this story that the first readers of Matthew's gospel would have understood that perhaps are not so obvious to us.

First, we might ask, why did the disciples cross the sea? Sounds like an old joke doesn't it? Well, the answer is the same. The disciples were crossing the sea to get to the other side. But this isn't crossing Lake Minnetonka to get from Wayzata to Excelsior. This is the Sea of Galilee, which though called a sea is less than half the size of Lake Mille Lacs. What's on the other side of the Sea of Galilee that prompts Jesus to immediately "make" or force the disciples to get into the boat and go before him to the other side?

Matthew's original audience would have known that that the side where the disciples started was Jewish territory. This was where Jesus had just miraculously fed the multitude. They would have also understood that the other side of the Sea of Galilee was Gentile territory, populated by people who were outsiders, not descendants of Abraham, Moses, and David. The biggest controversy in the early church was whether or not Gentiles could be part of the church without first becoming Jewish. Here, Jesus commands the disciples to get into the boat and sail to the other side of the sea, to Gentile territory.

As the disciples cross the sea, they encounter a storm. Here's a second thing Matthew's audience would have known that may go right over our heads. The sea is often used in the Bible as a metaphor for chaos. If you have ever been on a ship in heavy seas, being tossed about by huge waves, you know the feeling of being powerless, having no control of the situation. The Bible opens with the creation story. On the first day God creates light. On the second day, God separates the waters from the waters and on the third day causes dry land to appear; that is, God brings order out of chaos. At the end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, John has a vision of heaven and he describes it as being a place where "the sea is no more." The bookends of the Bible, Genesis and

Revelation, proclaim that God has not just brought order out of the midst of chaos, but in the end will triumph over chaos once and for all.

In ancient days, placing your foot on someone was a way of showing power and authority over him or her. We still see that in our language today. On those rare occasions when the Twins beat the other team by a large margin, the announcer might say, “The Twins walked all over the Red Sox tonight.” By that he means that the Twins totally dominated the Sox in that game. When Matthew’s audience heard that Jesus walked on the sea, they would have understood the fuller significance of that – Jesus has authority and power over chaos. That’s why it’s important for us to say that Jesus walked on the sea – not just that he walked on water.

I said that there are three things in this story that Matthew’s audience would have recognized that are not obvious to us – the significance of Jesus telling the disciples to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the significance of Jesus walking on the sea, and the third thing – well, actually, our St. Barnabas community may understand better than most contemporary Christians the significance of the third thing, that the disciples were in -- a boat.

With our congregational logo being a boat, we understand that since early on in the history of the church, a boat has been a symbol for the church itself. The boat of the church is like a modern-day Noah’s ark, saving all aboard from the waters of the flood. In a church sanctuary, the area where the altar and pulpit are located is called the “chancel” and the area where the congregation sits is called the “nave”, which comes from the Latin word “navis” which means boat or ship. In our gospel story, we have the twelve disciples (who at this point could be considered to be the entire church) in a boat, directed by Jesus to go across a sea to the other side, to people considered to be outsiders.

Now let’s return to my stained-glass window which focuses just on Jesus and Peter and re-crop the picture to see the whole scene. In addition to Jesus and Peter, we should see the eleven disciples in the boat. We should also note that Jesus does not immediately cause the storm to stop. What he does at first, as he walks on the sea and the storm continues to rage, is to say to those in the boat, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

It’s at this point that Peter gets out of the boat to come to Jesus. Should Peter be commended for his risk-taking, for being willing to leave the safety of the boat for the sake of trying to get to Jesus? That’s how many people interpret this story, but I’d like to invite you to consider the possibility that Peter is here a negative example rather than a positive one. That is, the message is not “Be like Peter”. Rather, the message may be, “Stay in the boat and don’t be like Peter.”

Consider that Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” That sounds vaguely familiar, like when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness and Satan says to him, “If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread.” And consider that later in this gospel, when Jesus first foretells his suffering and death, Peter protests and says, “Lord, this will never happen to you”, only to have Jesus rebuke him and say, “Get behind me, Satan.” Peter did not set a good example in that instance, and perhaps the same is true when he gets out of the boat and tries to walk to Jesus over the stormy sea on his own.

As Matthew tells this story, he is telling us something about the nature of faith. The message is not “If Peter had enough faith, he could have walked on the sea.” The message is not “If we had enough faith, we could overcome all our problems in spectacular ways.” This interpretation is wrong in that it expects faith to receive spectacular exceptions to what we understand as “normal” in our ordinary days, days that are all subject to the laws of physics and biology. This is wrong because it prompts us to feel guilt because of our supposed “lack of faith” when we don’t receive miraculous exceptions to the realities of accident, disease, and aging.

As you ponder this story this coming week, consider looking at it from this angle – that the message of the text is “If Peter had had enough faith, he would have believed the word of Jesus that came to him while he was in the boat (“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid”) and known the reality that Christ came to him and all he needed to do was trust Jesus’ word. For faith is not being able to walk on the sea – only God can do that. Faith is daring to believe, in the face of all evidence to the contrary, that God is with us in the boat, made real in the community of the church as it makes its way through the storm battered by the waves.” (Boring)

Jesus rebukes Peter for his efforts, but to those who remain in the boat, who don’t even attempt Peter’s bold efforts, Jesus just comes, gets into the boat with them, and there is a great calm at the ending of the storm. Maybe faith, great faith, is that calm, unheroic, but still impressive conviction that enables you to stay at your place in the boat, even though there’s a storm, confident that you don’t have to come to Jesus. In good time, he’ll come to you and he will say simply, “Hush!” to the waves. And the waves become calm. And at that moment, when all is strangely still and your faith is vindicated, you are able to say with your shipmates, “Truly you are the Son of God.”