

## **“Balancing Self-Care with Concern for Others”**

**Matthew 14:22-33**

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Today’s reading from Matthew 14 is very familiar to most of us. Depending on our perspective, it is either deeply inspiring or absolutely ridiculous, and in either case, it provides the subject matter for an array of jokes. Jesus walks on the water in this story, but Peter begins to sink when he tries to do so. It would seem that no one has shown him where the rocks are, one joke says, though having seen and swum in Lake Galilee, I can tell you there are many rocks all around the shore, particular near Tabgha below Capernaum. This may not be a joke.

But even Sophie in *The Da Vinci Code* makes light of walking on water. As she is talking with Robert Langdon outside Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland about what it might mean if she really is a descendent of Jesus, she wonders, facetiously, if she might be able to change water to wine. Then, she touches the top of a small pool of water with her toe, as if to walk on it, and says, “Nope. Maybe I will do better with the wine.”

It is easy to get lost in the miraculous details of this story, whatever we make of them, and miss the full intent of the story — not just one message about who Jesus is, but a number of messages about life and faith. If we can suspend judgment on the world in which this story is set, leave the debate about whether the historical Jesus really walks on water and what this may say about his humanity, there is much in this story which speaks to our lives today.

One thing this story does is offer us an important word about self-care. Jesus has been trying to get some rest for some time. Before last week’s reading from Matthew, Jesus is not just weary from ministry, he has just learned that John the Baptist has been killed. He tries desperately to get away and spend some time by himself, even takes a boat to a deserted place. But the crowds that follow him are like first-century paparazzi hounding their new object of interest. He shows

compassion for them, cures their sick, and eventually ends up feeding them, thousands of them.

This is the point at which we join the story today. Jesus is even more exhausted and in need of a break. So, he sends his disciples to the other side of the lake on a boat, he sends the crowds home, and then he hikes up a mountain to spend some time by himself. A storm comes in the night, as a storm came through Raleigh Monday night of this past week, and he is back at work, helping out the disciples, but he has had some time to rest, to pray, to renew his heart, mind, body and spirit.

It is something we see throughout the Gospels. Jesus is very intentional about finding time to be alone and rest, time to let go of responsibility and deepen his connection to God. He is who he is, God is somehow uniquely involved in his life, but a part of why he is able to walk the faithful path he walks and do the things he does is because he takes care of himself and constantly works at centering his life in God.

To put it another way, even Jesus needs to rest. He is fully human, after all, in addition to being fully divine, and in the Genesis 1 creation narrative, even God rests. Even Jesus needs to practice self-care. So, why would any of us think we are above such a need? It is not simply misplaced to think of ourselves as invulnerable, indefatigable; it is a form of idolatry! It is saying that we are stronger, more persevering, perhaps wiser, and maybe even more spiritual than Jesus. It is not something any of us really wants to say.

And yet, many of us struggle to take care of ourselves. And when I say *us*, I am including myself as the chief of sinners. I have told some of you about a time when Ian was very small, I was working 60–70 hours a week and I was trying to finish a dissertation. I tucked Ian into bed one night for the first time in weeks — because I had not been home any time he was awake — and he looked at Dana and said, “Daddy came to visit my house today.” If that didn’t get my attention, Dana then told me she had a dream in which our beloved dog Fosdick had died, but he lay in the backyard for a month because I didn’t have time to bury him.

Self-care has been a challenge for me all of my life. There are many healthy habits I practice faithfully from daily exercise and prayer disciplines to mentor and peer relationships and things I do for fun. But

taking regular time away from work, taking days off and vacations, completely disengaging from work stresses, has always been a work in progress. It is for many of us, and to be clear, this is not something to be proud of, it is a shortcoming to address.

In this time of social isolation and economic uncertainty, self-care is an even greater need than usual, and a greater challenge. A Baptist News Global article this week documented the many mental health challenges people have faced during COVID-19. A study done with 2,700 people by Qualtrics at the beginning of the pandemic found that 67% reported higher levels of stress, 57% had greater anxiety, 54% experienced greater day-to-day sadness, and 42% said their overall mental health had declined since the outbreak. This was in April. Imagine what these numbers might be now.

We have not just the fear of catching the virus or giving it unknowingly to a loved one, but the uncertainty of work and school and the absence of many activities that normally help us — coming to church, going to movies and ballgames, just being with other people more, being able to touch other people. The need is great in this time, and many resources are not available to us, but in such a time as this, it is even more critical that we practice self-care in the ways we can.

Prayer is always possible. Nothing can restrict our conversation with God. There are ways to exercise, if not all the ways we prefer. I have run more the past five months than any time during the past ten years. There are movies to watch at home, books to read, pets to dote on, friends and loved ones to FaceTime, gardens to work in, needlework to do, canvases to paint, water to boat on, and ordinary rest to have.

One of my mentors tried to impress on his students the need for self-care and to help us practice it, he shared some of his strategies with us. For example, if someone wanted him to do something on his day off, he would tell them, “Sorry. I am doing nothing that day.” If the person then made a request, he would say, “I said I am *doing nothing*, and when I do it, I do it very well.” If that did not work, he would use a word that speaks to every good Baptist’s heart, saying, “I have a previous *commitment* that day.” There are times when we need to be committed to doing nothing. It is not all that self-care involves, but it is a part of it.

Yet while this story offers us an important word about self-care, it also offers us a word about showing concern for others. There is a need to balance these tasks. Jesus practices good self-care in this story, thus providing an example for us, but he also ends up coming to his disciples' aid. A storm comes in the night and their boat is battered by the waves. Even experienced fisherman can be frightened by the sea. At first, Jesus adds to their fear by walking on the water. But then, he tells them it is him, they do not need to be afraid, and eventually the storm calms down.

So, Jesus addresses his own needs for rest and renewal, but this doesn't mean he neglects the needs of others. As soon as he is rested, he springs back into action, seemingly with a new level of energy, and he extends concern to his closest friends in a time of need. Yet not only does Jesus provide an example for balancing self-care with concern for others, so does Peter, just not a positive example.

Peter is often ridiculed for a number of things for which he may not deserve ridicule. He is bold and impulsive, often speaking his mind before he has any idea what to say, thus endearing himself to many preachers. And in this story, he ventures out in faith to walk on water just like Jesus, but cannot pull it off. He lacks the necessary faith. But who among us has the faith to walk on water, if faith is what is required?

I do not want to ridicule Peter for his boldness, even when he falls short. But there is something in this text a scholar noted which I find intriguing, something I had not considered before. Everyone is in the boat together, probably frightened first by the storm and then by the sight of Jesus walking on the water. They think he is a ghost! Why wouldn't they? Jesus tries to calm them down, tells them it is him. Why doesn't Peter leave it there and allow Jesus to come to them?

All of the disciples are in the same boat, literally. Why does Peter have to stand out like some misplaced peacock? "Sometimes we want our own miracle *at the expense of* others who are in the same boat with us," observes Mitzi J. Smith, New Testament Professor at Columbia Theological Seminary. "Jesus reached out his hand and caught Peter, and they both got into the boat with the other disciples," she says, "It is when they are all in the boat together with Jesus that the winds calm down ([workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org))."

It may be that Peter, at least in this story, is a prototype for the ugly American. We value rugged individualism, which can be a good thing, but when taken to the extreme, it can provide a barrier to community. **Comparitively, Whereas** the African perspective is to claim that without “us” there is no “me”, here it is just me, me, me. Whereas in Europe, a deep concern for community and nation stands alongside individual rights and privileges, we seem obsessed with our own needs to the exclusion of others. Could it be that this is a significant part of why we are having about the worst experience with COVID-19 of any nation in the world?

The virus itself is the primary cause of harm, and our lack of a clear national policy from the very beginning has not helped, but no matter what policies are implemented anywhere, we Americans don’t want to be told we have to do anything. We don’t want to wear masks. We don’t want governors telling us we can’t open all of our businesses immediately. We have our rights! It is all so unnecessary, so selfish, and so counterproductive. If we could just balance our self-need and self-assertion with a tiny bit of concern for others, we might all benefit.

On our way back from seeing Ian and Brittany in Memphis, we stopped at a gas station on this side of Nashville. When a young woman at the cash register in front of Dana turned around and saw her wearing a mask, she launched into a tirade about masks, saying it was all political. Then, her husband — who, like her, was not wearing a mask — walked up to Dana and exhaled into her face. The older lady working the cash register looked at Dana and said, “Honey, I’m so sorry.” Fortunately I was pumping gas into the car while this was happening. I am not certain how I would have responded... Individual rights are sacred, but it is difficult to understand how obsessed some people are with them.

Peter is focused on himself, on trying to prove his faith, without any consideration of anyone else. It doesn’t go very well for him. Jesus is coming to his disciples as a storm is raging, coming to calm them and the storm itself. In the end, they are moved to worship and call him the Son of God! Because he has walked on water? Perhaps. Because they think he has calmed the storm? Probably. But just as revealing of his

true character is the basic reality that he balances his need for self-care with his calling to help others. We could learn much from his example.

When I say “we” here, I am talking about our nation. In this church, though we are not perfect, I see a lot of balance, I see people seeking to care for themselves but also extending concern to others in practical ways and simply by choosing to embrace what we need to do right now, or to be more precise, what we need not to do.

There are churches that have demanded to gather and many of them have paid a price for their impatience. There are other churches where people are putting a lot of pressure on leaders to get back to normal activities. We want to do that as much as anyone else, and we are exploring options for small groups to do things, mostly outside with appropriate precautions. But I am grateful to be part of a church where people want to do what the best science tells us is safe to do and is in the best interest not just of us but of everyone we interact with every day.

I agree with Pittsburgh Theological Seminary professor L. Roger Owens, whom I referenced in the greeting, who sees this as a moment for Christians to follow Jesus in his mode of giving up status and privilege, setting aside self-assertion for the benefit of others. And I love his reference to John Wesley’s rules for singing, the last of which is this — if following any of these rules for singing is a cross for you (is difficult), take it up, and you will find it a blessing. In this maddeningly difficult time, we find a blessing in choosing not to do some things.

In the end, it might be easier to walk on water than to face some of our challenges — living with a pandemic, addressing racial inequality, overcoming our divisions — but our calling is to follow Jesus in taking care of ourselves so that we have the strength to address the needs of others. May God grant us the wisdom to do so.