

“Lessons We Learn in a Crisis”

Matthew 14:22–33

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After considering numerous parables set in an agricultural world which few of us know much about, last week we shifted focus to a miracle story, and today we consider a story set on water, something many of us know more about. In fact, the current issue of *First Foundations* has the theme of “Water.” It’s almost as if the lectionary editors have been spying on us, but these texts were chosen long before the theme for our magazine was. So, let’s call it the work of the Spirit.

I wrote an article about water, and here I could share many stories about boating experiences like the one the disciples have in the story from Matthew 14, but I will share one Dana was not a part of so that she won’t be tempted to correct me at any point... One year when I was a teenager on July 4 our family decided to sail our twenty-two-foot South Coast from Louisville to Twelve Mile Island on the Ohio River, along with another family who had a twenty-one-foot Cal. About halfway there an intense thunderstorm hit with heavy rains and winds up to fifty knots.

We debated dropping our sails and motoring, but since my father and I had a lot of sailing experience on more treacherous ocean water, and because we had y chromosomes, we changed our Ginny for a Jib, then dropped the Jib and had only the Main, and finally reefed the Main. We kept close to the wind and sailed through the storm just fine.

But we failed to notice what was going on with our friends. They were brand new boat owners. Herb had sailed once off the coast of Chile, and his wife had to send a fisherman out to bring him back. He was not experienced. Seeing that we kept our sails up, he did the same, only he kept up his full Main and Ginny, while sailing across the wind, thus putting the tip of his mast in the water. They survived, and we had a nice picnic on Twelve Mile Island, but Herb’s wife made him sell the boat.

It was a challenging experience for us, but a terrifying one for our friends, and for my mother and sisters who were inside our cabin telling my

father and me that were crazy. In situations like this, we find out a lot about ourselves — how we respond to adversity, what survival skills we have, and what or Who we believe in. Even those who have sailing experience utter a few prayers, if we have any sense, but for novices, like our friends, it is an occasion for deep spiritual probing, wondering if we will make it, and whether there is Anyone out there to help us.

The disciples' experience in our text is like this. As the story begins, Jesus commands them to get in the boat, *agnagkazo* is the Greek word. We might say he compels them. He says, "Get in the boat!" and then dismisses the crowd and goes up on the mountain to pray. He sends them into the storm and goes off to have some quiet time. Perhaps he is praying for them in advance, but they will blame him if they die!

In any event, they get into the boat, most likely a long, thin boat that is not very deep — one from the first century was discovered in 1986, still intact — and when night falls, a storm hits. Lake Galilee — and it is a lake, not a sea — is not that big, and some of the disciples are experienced fishermen, but this lake is like Chesapeake Bay. A storm can make it dangerous very quickly. Our translation says the boat is "battered" by the waves. We could translate the word as "tormented." The storm is so strong and the waves so intense that the disciples are scared out of their wits, and the winds are against them, so they can't make it to the shore.

But just as they are about to give up, Jesus walks toward them on the lake. He finally comes down from the mountain. We might assume they are relieved, but they think he is a ghost and cry out in fear. Before we become too critical, we might consider how we would respond. Jesus hasn't done this before. No one has. Why would they think he can walk on water? But he says, "Take heart, it is I (I AM), do not be afraid."

Surely at this point the disciples calm down... but alas, they don't. Peter says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He wants proof, not just words of assurance. So, Jesus says, "Come," and we know what happens next. Peter starts to walk on the water but quickly becomes frightened and begins to sink. Apparently, he can't swim, at least not in this storm. So, he cries out, "Lord, save me!" and Jesus does, asking him why he has so little

faith. When they get into the boat, the wind ceases, and now finally the disciples worship Jesus, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

So, what is the message for us here? It is not a simplistic word about faith being revealed in difficult circumstances. Peter’s faith does not lead to Jesus calming the storm. It’s the other way around. Only when the wind ceases do the disciples worship Jesus and say he is the Son of God. Hebrews 11:1 says faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen*. The disciples do not reveal this kind of faith. They want proof before they calm down and believe.

But perhaps this is comforting for us. For we don’t always respond to existential threats with profound faith. We ask why we have received this diagnosis. We feel a debilitating mixture of sadness and anger when we learn about a tragic accident, wondering what difference God makes. We feel lost when we are forced to abandon our dream or hear about the latest injustice in the world. We have doubts, but so do the disciples.

Yet there is more here than companionship in misery. Commenting on this text, pastor and Professor Zina Jacque points to what the disciples learn about themselves and Jesus in this crisis, and how often our leaning takes place in similar circumstances. Over the years teaching in different contexts, Zacque has asked people about the most important lessons they have learned and how many they learned in times of ease. At most 5% learned a key lesson when all was going well. Most are learned through hardship. The disciples learn a great deal in a storm.

They learn that they are frail and vulnerable, and that in such moments, it is okay to question and doubt; in fact, they should acknowledge their need for help; and ultimately they learn that they can trust Jesus to be with them and help them. In like manner, we learn that it is okay for us to question and doubt, we are in good company when we do; it is helpful to acknowledge our need and ask for help, no matter how we do it; and it is in our vulnerability that faith begins to develop.

I think of the scene near the end of “The Da Vinci Code” where Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu are debriefing the discovery that she is the Holy Grail, the last living descendent of Jesus. At one point, she taps her foot on a pond, as if she is going to walk on it, and says, “Nope. Maybe I’ll do better

with the wine.” It may seem irreverent, but how many jokes have we heard about knowing where the rocks are?

But just before this, Langdon says that while as a scholar he believes all we know about Jesus is that he was a great teacher, when he was trapped in a well as a boy, he prayed to Jesus, prayed that he could see his parents again, go to school, play with his dog. It seems odd. Why would you pray to someone you don’t believe in? Well, why does Peter ask Jesus to save him when he isn’t even sure it is him?

Acknowledging our need for help is a critical first step of faith development. Crying out to God or Jesus, even if we are not yet sure what we believe, is also helpful. In his book *Thoughts in Solitude*, Trappist monk Thomas Merton included these words in a prayer, “I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you (p. 79).” In like manner, the desire to have faith in God is a step in the direction of having faith. It leads to Peter’s survival, and it may lead to ours, which is good news because sometimes it is all we can manage.

Yet there is something faithful in Peter’s actions even before he joins the others in worshiping Jesus. He tries to walk on water. His request for proof takes the form of asking Jesus to command him to walk to him. It is a risky venture, a leap of faith, but faith requires risk.

Ernest Campbell said the reason we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, pp. 334, 336). Will Willimon put it this way. “If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed the call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by 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 by trusting his promises, through risk and venture (“How Will You Know If It’s Jesus?” August 7, 2005).” Indeed.

It’s helpful to know it’s okay to question and doubt, it’s encouraging to realize that simply longing for faith is a step in the right direction, but at some point, we need some skin in the game, some willingness to take a risk for what we long for, which in itself is a kind of faith.