

A Boat Named 'College Hill'

Jesus and Peter walk on the Sea

Matthew 14:22-33
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
August 10, 2008

Have any of you ever owned a boat? And not just any boat, but the kind where you actually gave it a name? I've never owned a boat, so I haven't gone through that naming process myself. So I went online this week and googled "boat names" and learned a lot in the process. For instance, some people end up spending more time trying to come up with a name for their boat than they do in picking one out and buying one in the first place. Some even said they found it harder to name their boat than their own children.

To help in this process, many web sites offer lists of potential boat names. Here's some of the most popular names from the last couple of years: Serenity, Liberty, Second Wind, Freedom, Therapy, Happy Hours, Destiny, Life is Good, and one of my favorites License to Chill.

It's not hard to notice that most of the names on this list have something to do with escape – as in escaping the pressures of life while out on the boat.

Those who actually make their living on the sea, however, know a very different reality – that the sea is often a very dangerous place, the very opposite of an escape from the pressures of life.

You may be wondering what any of this has to do with our gospel reading from Matthew 14? Actually quite a bit, as we shall see. Boats and the sea play an important role in many biblical stories, sometimes literally and sometimes as metaphorical symbolism.

For instance, from a biblical perspective the sea most often carried the connotation not as a peaceful escape from the pressures of life, but as a dangerous, unpredictable, chaotic, and even demonic place. Going all the way back to the first chapter in Genesis we learn that **the waters of the sea symbolize the forces chaos. In the creation story, God brings order out of that chaos.**

To extend the metaphor further, a boat sailing on the sea is introduced. **The strength and nature of one's boat determined whether or not it could survive a trip upon the sea of chaos.**

This morning's gospel reading involves all these elements and more. On a surface level, it is the story of a boat that is battered by the waves of a storm-tossed sea. Those in the boat probably weren't sure if their boat was strong enough to prevail. Ever since this story was first told orally and then put in print, its

meaning on a deeper metaphorical level was clear. In fact, it can almost be read like a parable.

Since the earliest days of Christianity, a boat has stood as a common symbol to represent the Church. Those in the boat represented Christians. And the storm-tossed sea, just like in Old Testament days, continued to mean chaos and the dark forces that threaten the goodness of life and the created order. In this instance it refers to the hardship, conflict, temptations, and persecution that battered the early church. And it is symbolic of the church's storm missionary journey through history.

Jesus, of course, plays the most important role in this story. Beyond any literal meaning of Jesus walking on the water to save his disciples – as in defying the laws of gravity – **this story always carried the metaphorical meaning that Christ overcomes the power of chaos, and therefore would prevail against anything that might try to destroy the Church and Christianity itself.**

This vivid imagery continues to be popular and meaningful in our day and age. Just last month the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church met in San Jose, California. One of the main items of business was to elect a new Stated Clerk of the General Assembly to serve a four-year term. The Assembly elected Gradye Parsons, who had previously served as associate stated clerk and director of operations for the Office of the General Assembly.

In a speech after his election, Parsons addressed the fear that tends to arise around the denomination. Incorporating the metaphorical imagery found in today's gospel passage, Parsons said that his mantra is **"Get in the boat. Go across the lake. There will be a storm. You will not die."**

For all the hand wringing in mainline churches today, I find this to be a remarkably wise, helpful, and yes very biblical, statement.

So our passage from Matthew has a lot to say to those in the boat named "The Church Universal". Gradye Parsons narrowed that down to address a boat named "The Presbyterian Church (USA)." And this morning I would narrow that down further to state that **this passage has a lot to say to those of us in this boat named "College Hill".**

So let's look at this passage a bit closer. It's very important to note how this story begins. We're told that "Jesus *made* the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee" (vs. 22). The disciples were simply being obedient in faithfully following the instructions that Jesus gave them. **It was Jesus who sent them out to sea.** Therefore, the difficulties they experience on the sea are not of their own making, but stem from their compliance with Jesus' command to venture forth.

So whether we're in a boat named "The Church Universal" or "The Presbyterian Church" or "College Hill" **we shouldn't be surprised then either when in following Jesus' instructions to venture forth, that the sea we travel upon sometimes becomes chaotic, unpredictable, and perhaps even a bit threatening.**

We are reminded that the church, then and now, is called into being by God. **It is God who sends us out in mission and ministry onto an often-dangerous sea.** If it were not for that divine calling, why would anyone volunteer to climb into the boat named the church (or College Hill) in the first place?

It is true that our denomination, as well as other mainline churches, are facing challenging and difficult times. **I find it disheartening, however, that so many folks have chosen to get out of the boat (leave the church), rather than to ride out the storm until God calms the sea.**

Now let me make a comment about the primary meaning behind Jesus' walking on the water to get to the boat, his response to the fearful disciples who don't recognize him with the words, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid," and his eventual calming of the wind and sea.

There were lots of folks in ancient biblical days who were considered to be miracle workers, especially in the area of healing. But this miracle is different. To have power to walk on water and to calm the sea meant to have **the ability to control nature. And the only one able to do that, according to any religious tradition, was God.**

This story, then, clearly wants us to see the life and ministry of Jesus as being equated with that of God. This is emphasized with Jesus' "It is I" statement. You may recall that in the story of Moses at the burning bush, when Moses asks for God's name, God responds with "It is I," or more literally, "I am."

Matthew is portraying Jesus as speaking with the very voice of God. Jesus clearly represents and mediates the direct power and divine presence of God in today's story.

This story, then, served as one of great comfort to the early church. While not spared suffering and death, they were confident that Christ would save them even if they were to die.

This story continues to serve as comfort to the church today. For no matter what the storms we face in the sea of the world around us, and I would add from any turmoil within, God comes to us to help us survive those storms.

I know that each one of us here this morning could make a list of the **storms** of we have faced, or are currently facing, in our lives. **And just as Jesus did not leave his disciples to fend for themselves in their hour of need, God will not leave us to fend for ourselves either.** We, too, in our boat named "College Hill" need to hear deep within our hearts and minds the same words, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

There is one more important element to this story, and that's Peter. Peter responds to Jesus' comment to not be afraid by asking permission to come to Jesus on the sea. Interestingly, he does not impetuously leap out of the boat, but rather waits until he hears the command from Jesus: "Come" (Matt. 14:28-19). For a brief time Peter, like Jesus, is able to walk on the rough sea.

It is in this instant that we catch a **brief glimpse of what Matthew believes discipleship is all about – obeying Jesus, sharing the fullness of his life and ministry, and moving toward him confidently even in the midst of a storm.**

But Peter cannot maintain his posture. He catches sight of the wind, and now there are two rival powers symbolically in view: Jesus and chaos. Peter's faith is now mixed with fear and, wondering whether Jesus or the raging wind will finally prevail, he begins to sink beneath the sea. **Matthew wants his readers to know that even when disciples falter Jesus continues to save.** He rescues Peter from the waves.

In our own journey of faith, we, like Peter, are often caught midway between certainty and doubt, between courage and anxiety. Yet **Peter, rather than representing failure, represents the risk-taking of faith. We, too are called to take risks, even when the outcome isn't certain.** Those of you who have been members of this congregation for quite some time could undoubtedly make a good long list of the risks this church has taken throughout the years – and continues to take.

The message from this story is not that Peter would have been able to walk on the sea if he only had enough faith. Likewise, the message to us is not, "If we had enough faith, we could overcome all our problems in spectacular ways." **Faith is not being able to walk on water – only God can do that – but daring to believe, in the face of all the evidence, that God is with us in the boat, and is made real in the community of faith as we make our way through the storm.**

The story of the disciples on the rough sea mirrors exactly the situation of Matthew's church, and in many ways mirrors the church today as well. It holds a promise that God comes to us in the midst of the storm – that the storm does not hold the upper hand – that God is present with us in the storm and rescues us.

So let's get in the boat. Let's go across the lake. Let's know there will be a storm. And let's know that we, the church, will not die.

Amen.