

Stepping Out in Faith

Today's gospel reading is a familiar story, a miracle story. Last Sunday we heard about another miracle—the Feeding of the Five Thousand, with just five loaves and two fish. If you will remember, this miracle happened just after Jesus had just been told about the horrible death of his cousin, John the Baptist. He wanted to be alone, and so he tried to escape the crowd that surrounded him by getting into a boat and going to a deserted place. But the crowd followed him around the shore, and so he let go of his own need and tended to the people, teaching them, healing their sick, and giving them food for their bodies as well as their souls.

But now, once again, he wants to be alone with God, and so Jesus tells the disciples to get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. The disciples set off in the boat, and Jesus goes up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening comes, Jesus is alone on the mountain and the disciples are about to spend a very uncomfortable night in the boat. The wind is against them and the waves have beaten them away from land. The Sea of Galilee is a big lake, thirteen miles long and eight miles wide—not a good place to be in a heavy wind.

So imagine, for a moment, that you are in that small, open boat, far from the shore. Waves slam the bow, and the boards creak in protest. The rigging bangs in the wind. You huddle together with the other disciples, drenched by the water that comes in over the side. The night is black around you, but cold and fear keep you from sleep. All night long, you beat against the wind, trying to return to the shore, thinking that if you can just get back to Jesus everything will be all right.

Early morning comes with a faint lightening of the sky to the east, and in that grey dawn, the figure of a man appears walking toward you across the sea. You've been up all night, you're tired and you're cold, and now this. You are terrified! First century science knows as well as twentieth century science that people can't walk on water. "It's a ghost!" you cry out in fear, and then you hear a familiar voice: "*Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.*" But is it really Jesus? Peter is not convinced. He needs proof. "Lord," he says, "*if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*" And Jesus says, "*Come.*"

Think about it. There you are in the middle of the howling wind and heaving sea. The boat is your only safety, your only hope of returning to land. And Peter *gets out of the boat*. He steps off the boat and into a miracle. For a moment, the wind holds its breath and the waves go still. Held in Jesus' gaze, he begins to walk toward him. Step by step, he draws closer to his Lord, *walking on water*. But then Peter notices the wind. Perhaps it tugs at the corner of his robe, or flings a spattering of spray across his face. And Peter comes to his senses. He comes to his senses of hearing and sight, touch and smell, the senses of the physical world which tell him that what he is doing doesn't *make* sense. He becomes frightened, and he starts to sink.

Even if we've never tried to walk on water, we can understand how Peter felt. Like Peter, we've all experienced these moments when we lose our confidence, lose our faith in what we are doing, and sink into the dark waters of doubt. "*Lord save me!*" Peter cries, and, immediately, Jesus reaches out his hand and catches him. But Jesus also chides him: "*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*"

This passage is often interpreted as an example of Peter's lack of faith. But I remember talking about it with a clergy friend who said he had always felt that Peter got a bum rap. After all, Peter was the only one who got *out* of the boat. Peter wanted to walk with Jesus, to share with him in his absolute faith and trust in God. He wanted to bridge the distance between a worldview that told him that all his fears and doubts made perfect sense, and a worldview that said all things are possible for the one who trusts. Jesus doesn't chide Peter for having *no* faith but for having *little* faith. Peter had just enough faith to let go of all that he normally trusted in, of the safe and familiar represented by the boat— remember that he was a fisherman— in order to walk with Jesus. And for a few breathless moments, he did walk with Jesus, fully, completely, without doubt, and then he lost it.

What would the story be like if he hadn't lost it, if he hadn't become afraid and started to sink? What if Peter had walked, and danced, and played on the water with Jesus, skipping across the waves without a trace of fear? It would be a different story, an even more remarkable story, but it wouldn't be a story about us. Because Peter in this story is so like us, and we are so like Peter. We want to walk with Jesus, sharing in his absolute trust and faith in God. We want to say to Jesus, "Command us to come to you on the water," and we want to have enough faith to step forth, leaving behind the safety and familiarity of our little boats, setting our feet firmly upon the waves. We want to bridge the distance between our worldview that tells us that all our fears and doubts and anxieties make complete sense, and Jesus' worldview that tells us that all things are possible if only we have enough faith.

So how does this story speak to us as we consider the future of the Greensboro United Church of Christ? As we approach the Associate Members' Meeting the Annual Meeting, and our yearly stewardship campaign, how might this story inform the commitment we make to this church of our time, and talent, and treasure? We live in a time when the whole mainline church appears to be in danger of sinking into the sea. It sometimes seems that, like Peter, we have lost our confidence, lost our faith in what we are doing, and are sinking into the dark waters of doubt. Could it be that part of our problem is having only a *little* faith?

I am among those who believe that the church still has much to offer to our post-modern world. In the July Gleanings, I described some of the work done by the Church Board at our retreat in March. One of our tasks was to begin to create a short-term strategic plan for the ministries of this church. We had a lot of information at hand, from the surveys and small-group meetings that helped the Search Committee put together the church profile, and from the history, identity and visioning activities we did in worship, last summer.

We also had a research report, from the United Church of Christ, that identified “Eleven Characteristics of Vital UCC Congregations.” We looked at these characteristics and asked ourselves, “How well do these describe our church?” Not surprisingly, many of the characteristics received both a plus and a minus— the characteristic is present but could be stronger. We then chose three characteristics on which we would like to see the church focus in the next two years. Vital UCC congregations:

- make a real difference in the lives of members and the wider community,
- work for social justice, and
- demonstrate fellowship and love for one another.

These three characteristics are, for me, a strong argument for supporting the work of the church. I often hear church members talk about the ways in which the church makes a real difference in their lives, and how they wish others would come and find the spiritual nurture and caring connection they have found here. It’s also important for us to look beyond ourselves and ask how we can make a real difference in the wider community, not only as individuals but as a church. Reaching out into the wider community is one of the ways in which we can meet people and invite them into the church. But even more, it is a way for us to love and serve the people Jesus loved and served— the poor, the struggling, the marginalized— without any thought of gain on our part. We reached out to the school because the need was there, and, in doing so, enriched both the lives of children and our own lives.

Some of us have found that being involved in the wider community has made us more aware of social justice issues close to home. And on the national level, we are living in a time when there is a tremendous need for people of faith to speak out on issues of social justice. The church informs us and teaches us about issues of justice— economic, gender, racial, environmental, and far too many more— and then strengthens us to witness and act for those who are being treated unjustly.

Finally, so many traditional forms of community have broken down in our post-modern world. Many people now seem to find their communities online rather than in face to face contact. At the same time, there is a tremendous longing for connection and belonging, and, in each church I have served, the sense of community— the ways in which we demonstrate fellowship and love for one another— has been right near the top of the list of the reasons why people keep coming to church.

And so I think it is vital for us to continue to support the church, not just to ensure the survival of an institution but to expand our possibilities for ministry. The church of the future may need to look different from church as we know it, but, as I have said before, as long as there are people trying to follow in Jesus’ Way, there will be church. As with Peter, Jesus may be asking us to have just enough faith to let go of what we normally trust in— the safe and familiar boat of what we have always done, and the way that we have always done it— in order to walk with him in a new way.

Even if we only have a little faith, I hope it will be just enough to get us out of the boat, and onto the uncertain sea. And if we start to sink, I hope we will remember that this is why we need Jesus. If we never sank, if we could walk on the water just fine by ourselves, we wouldn't need a savior. It is at these moments that we remember who we are and who we belong to. It is when we sink, as Peter did, as we all do, that Jesus reaches out his strong hand and pulls us from the depths. It is our little faith that gets us out of the boat and moving toward Jesus. It is his big faith that brings him striding across the waves, to give us a hand whenever we start to go down. So I hope you will have enough faith in the future— in the excitement of calling and working with a new settled pastor, in the satisfying work of making the goals of the strategic plan a reality, in exploring the new ways you might be called to be the church, and, most of all, in God's ongoing care for Christ's church— to commit your time, your talent, and, yes, your treasure, to ensuring that this is a vital UCC congregation for years to come.

Amen.