

"God With Us"

Matthew 14:22-33

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The Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

My first indication of the goings on in Charlottesville this weekend was a Facebook post by one of our Co-Moderators, Tawnya Anderson, she wrote, "Some of us can turn away from these images out of privilege. Others of us have to turn away from them out of self-care and self-preservation. They're using brass knuckles and bats on clergy. CLERGY!" So I went to check out some of the news sites and found reports about a rally planned by "white nationalists, neo-Nazis and the KKK" their largest rally in decades with the plan to "take America back" (Washington Post Online).

Charlottesville's city manager said, "Hate came to our town today in a way that we had feared but we had never really let ourselves imagine would" (Washington Post On-line). On this, I happen to agree with Gandhi, "The enemy is fear. We think it's hate, but it's fear."

Though I haven't seen an official written response from the PCUSA other than the PDA heading to Charlottesville, but The Presbyterian Outlook reposted an article on race published last summer, it included this portion of the PCUSA's anti-racism policy,

"Through colonization and slavery, the United States of America helped to create and embrace a system of valuing and devaluing people based on skin color and ethnic identity. The name for this system is *white supremacy*. This system deliberately subjugated groups of people for the purpose of material, political, and social advantage. Racism is the continuing legacy of white supremacy. Racism is a lie about our fellow human beings, for it says that some are less than others. It is also a lie about God, for it falsely claims that God favors parts of creation over the entirety of creation."

The storm that erupted in Virginia is both old and new, and driven by fear. Of course the gospel speaks to it all and it speaks boldly and thoroughly if we back up a bit from today's reading.

Because, Jesus walking on water is the second stormy lesson for the disciples. During the first storm, Jesus was in the boat but asleep; the disciples, in their fear, woke him up and he stilled the winds and the waves. He saved them, but chastised them for their fear and "smallness of faith" (Long, p. 95). That experience came right after he began to teach them about the cost of discipleship, the longest, hardest lesson of the gospels. Great crowds come and go around Jesus but not all people pledge themselves to his Way; many want to be in his presence but cannot grasp the depth of commitment to his self-giving path. Discipleship is always a progression.

Between the first storm and the second, between chapters eight and fourteen, Jesus healed the sick, exorcised demons, granted forgiveness to sinners, raised a little girl from the dead and provided the power for healing to a hemorrhaging woman; he gave sight to the blind and voice to the mute. By demonstration and instruction, he taught the disciples how to do all this as well and sent them out to practice. As they celebrated their success, he began to teach them about the dangers of disrupting the status quo by helping people become healthier in body and mind. He started using parables which gave them images to help explain the profound tension of being of heaven while living on earth. More progression.

And after all of that, he fed 10,000 or more people on a hillside with five loaves of bread and two fish after which he dismissed the crowd and sent the disciples back home by way of the boat he, himself, had rowed over. It seems the faith of the disciples should be soaring – as the song says, “No storm can shake my inmost calm,”; wouldn’t it be great to feel that way all the time!

But storms on the earth are real, our bodies and minds react instinctively to the threat of high winds and water. When the tornado sirens go off, our heartrate picks up, and if the sky is black or that terrible, sickly yellow color, or if the wind is bending the trees in half; or likewise when someone gets out the baseball bats and brass knuckles, our limbs also begin to shake. That’s human nature and body chemistry. The same is true when someone gets sick or corporate downsizing is in the air. There are many ways we feel a threat to our way of life including the difficulty of facing death itself. Jesus felt this too; he wept, he asked that the cup of crucifixion be passed from his lips. But he also knew that he could not compromise on his mission. He knew that the ends do not justify the means.

In Jesus’ boat, staying alive is not the goal of living, serving God is the goal of living. Staying solvent, staying in control, being right, none of these is the goal of living; letting go, serving God is the goal of living. It’s not even about being a great church, it is about being with the God who is not only with us but already out ahead of us trying to lead us to the kingdom on earth.

This is hard for us, it’s hard for us to get and keep a kingdom focus. In these recent months, I am finding out there are more “isms” to describe human systems of governance than I ever knew; we get focused on building and sustaining, maybe reforming but certainly controlling, human systems and in doing so are often dishonest about the snake we bring into every single garden we’ve planted. The hope of the gospel is that we will learn discernment – to work at finding out what it is God is already doing and then join in, to discern what God needs us to do under whatever circumstance we face – and then have the courage to do it!

Time and again, the scriptures ask us to choose whom we will serve because time and again, the world comes battering at our door with opportunities for power and success or with the news of misfortune and fearful things and we lose our focus. That is the way of the world; we are taught to put all our eggs in the Republican basket or the Democrat basket; or that we must choose prolife or prochoice as if any one side can hold all of what is right or true.

Jesus approaches disciples in the middle of life’s systems and distractions with the invitation and power to align ourselves so closely with his mission that we can step out and walk on top of our baptismal waters to disrupt the ‘isms,’ by naming the evils within our systems, even those from which we benefit. This is where the progression of the constant lessons and practice of discipleship will lead whether or not that’s what we want to be when we get there.

Doug Hare says, this passage, “graphically depicts what it means to be a Christian caught midway between faith and doubt. Peter represents all who dare to believe that Jesus is Savior, take their first steps in confidence that he is able to sustain them, and then forget to keep their gaze fixed on him instead of on the towering waves that threaten to engulf them. In the depth of the crisis, when all seems lost, they remember to call on the Savior and find his grace sufficient for their needs, ...” (Hare, p. 169-170).

In today’s storm, Jesus is not in the boat but comes to the disciples across the water. By standing on the water, he is not denying the fears of living, he doesn’t deny the storm. But he does not get caught up in it either. He transcends the storm, by staying focused on God, on the mission. In the first storm, he made the boat a safe – and that’s our preference, right? Our preference is for God to take away the things that frighten us and make the boat safe! But here’s the kicker in our either/or systems: God does want to make the boat safe – for all God’s children and not by race or creed or orientation, or bank balance or

religion or denomination political party or any other perception of human worth. One group's private practices of seeking safety, time and time again throughout history, subjugates or put others at greater risk. So Jesus approaches us across the water and he beckons Peter to get out of the boat. The storm then becomes an opportunity to practice our faith, to practice risk taking that may lead to someone else feeling more safe, more loved, or receiving more justice.

As one commentator said, "Jesus asks Peter in verse 31, 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' Here [the description] 'of little faith' echoes its earlier appearance in the sea storm [in chapter 8] (8:28) and anticipates its occurrence in the final passage before Peter's confession [that Jesus is the Messiah in chapter 16] (16:8). This word [for 'of little faith' also translated as 'doubt'] is always used by Matthew with respect to believers and never unbelievers, that is, its purpose is to rebuke those who fail to draw on their faith. A parallel of sorts is provided by the Fourth Gospel, where believing is always a verb, never a noun; faith is not a possession but an activity. It is like a song that disappears when we stop singing. Those of little faith are warned that they must exercise their little faith or it will wither away like an unused muscle" (Hare, p. 170).

If God With Us/Emmanuel comes, he comes for all. He brings grace, forgiveness, and love for all. Do we still want him to arrive if there's no privilege (because in the long run the prosperity gospel does not hold water) or (if there's no) righteous superiority (as in his teaching: before you point out the speck in another's eye, take the log out of your own)? Do you want him to come (calling) if (it means) he's going to call you out of the safe places and out onto the open water in the storm?

I had the privilege of sitting in the balcony on Thursday morning and listen to the concert Aaron presented for the Organ Historical Society. In showcasing the Fisk in all its power and glory, at the start of a piece by Max Reger I instinctively looked up to check the rafters to see if they were still intact. And they are! Those beautiful beams have stood the storm of every sorrow life can hold for the last one hundred years. And because of these beams, we have an ark as our God-given shelter in which to practice "faithing" one another so that we can go out and show our faith to the world. These beams are a witness to generations who, like us, have said, Yes! Come Lord Jesus! Yes, take my life! Yes, let me be love, not fear no matter the storm! And may it be so. Amen.