

## “Do Not Be Afraid.”

Matthew 14:22-33

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<sup>22</sup>Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup>And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup>but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. <sup>25</sup>And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. <sup>26</sup>But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. <sup>27</sup>But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “**Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.**”

<sup>28</sup>Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” <sup>29</sup>He said, “**Come.**” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. <sup>30</sup>But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” <sup>31</sup>Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “**You of little faith, why did you doubt?**” <sup>32</sup>When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. <sup>33</sup>And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Prayer.

As I look out upon the landscape of today's world I have come to recognize the fact that there are a lot of people who I pity. I'm not talking about people for whom I have compassion. I have compassion for people who crack my heart open wide, and I know God is calling me to reach out with ***the passionate and extravagant love of Christ.***

Rather, I'm talking about people I pity; people I feel sorry for, who don't cause my heart to open, who don't cause my emotions to swell, or who don't cause my arms to want to hold. Generally, I don't like being around people I pity. I thrive on being with people for whom I have compassion. Compassion and pity – for me, are two very different things. The difference is important.

For example, I have compassion for individuals and their families who are struggling with an end of life disease. However, I pity the person who has never had a sick day in their life.

I have compassion for the person who finds themselves laid off, through no fault of their own, who now has to either become homeless or go on public assistance and

take part in a retraining program, even though they are a year or two away from retirement. However, I pity the person who has never had to think about working a day in their life.

I have compassion for individuals who have earned their wrinkles, while I pity those who botox them away.

I have compassion for the working poor, and all those who live from paycheck to paycheck. I pity those who win the lottery, who are bequeathed an inheritance, or who are born with a silver spoon in their mouth.

I have compassion for parents who struggle to raise their kids right, who fight with them to get them to Sunday school and church. I pity the parents who allow their children make their own adult decisions.

I have compassion for those victimized by clergy sexual abuse. Throw open the bank accounts, I say, and hire the appropriate therapists who can bring healing. Bring in the trainers and educators to implement prevention programs and policies. I pity the perpetrators who don't care about their victims, or who are too narcissistic to break a cycle of abuse they have found themselves churning. Protect society by isolating them, I say; let them think about the judgment that is to come.

I have compassion for colleagues who have faithfully served in the trenches of ordained ministry and who are reaching the age of retirement. I have pity on the young seminary graduate who has the pride and arrogance of untested theology, and who wouldn't know "the valley of the shadow of death" even if they tripped over it.

I pity those who get away with murder, who beat the criminal justice system, or who trample on international courts. For I know they have yet to meet their judge, the only judge who will truly matter in regards to their ultimate concern. I have compassion for people who live with a conscience, who try to do the right thing, who stand up for morality even when it is the unpopular thing to do.

It is said that **"Lives worth living are not those who always stay in the safe harbors but are those that dare to venture out into the storm."** I couldn't agree more.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus puts his disciples right into the middle of a storm. Even worse, he gives Peter permission to get out of the boat and to walk on the water over to where he was standing! You can almost hear Jesus sigh, "all right, if you have to, Come."

Now I understand if some of us here today are a little uncomfortable with Jesus putting

his disciples intentionally in harms way. After all, we do find it comforting and gratifying to petition God for safety on the highways and byways of life during our prayers of joys and concerns!

That uncomfortable dis-ease with which Jesus gives us may be the very catalyst that breaks open our heart, gets us unstuck in our journey of faith. Indeed, Jesus seemingly puts his disciples in harms way, then acts with apparent unconcern for Peter's safety by telling him to get out of the boat in the midst of a raging storm. "Jesus, what are you thinking?!!!"

This was the first time Jesus separated himself from his disciples for any length of time. He put them in the safety of a boat, then went by himself to pray. Think symbolically with me for a moment – the safety of a boat – a boat which is often used in early centuries to describe the Church. The boat is the means of safety Jesus provides, during their time of physical separation.

The boat protects them from the sea, from utter chaos. It holds at bay the wind and the waves. The boat protects them from the anxieties, the dark powers that lurk in the depths, and death of this world. Stay in the boat that Christ provides, and there is nothing to worry about. The boat, the Church, is God's gift of safety given to His disciples. The boat holds chaos at bay. The boat always weathers the storm.

The boat lets us leave the safe harbors of this world, to leave the safe, sheltered, protected ways of life, and to venture out upon the seas of ministry, taking the ministry of Christ to where the sin and the pain exist, out in the middle of the storm, out on the open seas, where the wind and rain and storms are certain to blow.

Let us not forget that God, in Christ, is the creator of the seas! He is the master of the seas! And when Peter asks to walk on water too, Jesus knows that by his command, a thousand angels can be summoned. By his command the wind and the waves can and will be stilled. By his power, order can be restored to chaos, when ever and where ever it presents itself.

**"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."** ... Peter steps out and starts to sink. "Jesus reached out his hand and caught him, **"You of little faith, why did you doubt?"**

Peter doesn't need to question or wonder. Right in front of his eyes is the one who called him, the one who just taught them all those Kingdom parables, the one who just miraculously fed 5,000 men and their families with 5 loaves and two fish. "Lord, if it is you ...." Peter snivels. If you don't know and you want a better look, then, alright, get out of the boat and walk on over.

Now Peter; take Peter- he is someone to pity.

But the Lord's heart is bigger than our hearts. It doesn't quite cut down the narrow alleyways and categories we employ. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Oh, yes, we are tempted to leave the boat. We are tempted to step out on our own, thinking that there is more to be discovered than what God is already revealing to us. Many step out of the church confident in their arrogance, ignorance, or agnostic diatribes – only to find themselves sinking beneath the waves of chaos.

I have a cousin who has been a member of just about every different denomination, has moved through periods of Islam and Judaism in his life, who now finds himself lost in obscure religions of the East. He's been pushing the limits all his life, stepping out into dangerous seas, full of pride and arrogance, all-the-while the rest of the family shakes its head in disbelief. And where has it gotten him?

I admire people who have faith and good sense enough to stay in the boat. It is sufficient faith to be in the boat, in the middle of the storm, in the first place! Speaking plainly, I admire people who have faith sufficient to remain active and growing in the mission and ministry of Christ's church, who aren't swayed by every new thought or newfangled style of worship or new church that comes down the pike, who aren't sucked in by every traveling salvation show big ego preacher.

I believe in the people God has put in the boat with us. We're together in this boat called the Church for a reason. There is a Divine plan here, that none of us may ever figure out. But there is a reason God put us in this boat together.

But we are here. Faith keeps us here. For we know that while the storm of life are raging, the God we've come to know and love is the creator of this world, is the master of it's storms, and, in the end, is the only one who will save us.

Take heart, fellow shipmates. God is with us!

The Word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.