

LET'S WALK ON WATER TOGETHER

August 7, 2011

I'm Diane and I attended seminary many years ago – BK, before kids. And since that time, I've served as a hospital chaplain and a hospice chaplain. But I don't have much experience preaching before such a congregation, so I hope you'll bear with me. I don't have the talents of Peggy or Chuck, but I will do my best...and I will attempt to walk on water.

Our scripture passage this morning tells a wonderful story...a story of renewal, of failure, of redemption...of our life story, really. The book of Matthew was actually written around 80 or 90 A.D., and the author is believed to have drawn on materials written by the apostle Matthew. Matthew, the apostle, kept a journal of sorts of different sayings that Jesus said, and then the author of Matthew borrowed material from that and wrote the gospel of Matthew.

Now the writer of Matthew is a storyteller. He's the one that gives us the beloved and detailed narrative of Jesus' birth, and he gives us details of other events in the life of Jesus that other gospel writers don't do. He embellishes our scripture passage this morning as well.

Imagine with me if you will, it's springtime. It's not as hot as it is here, I don't think. It's approximately 30 A.D. and Herod is the king, the same Herod that will play a role later in Jesus' trial and death. At this point, though, Jesus has just received word that His good friend and cousin, John the Baptist, is dead. He wants, He yearns for time to pray and grieve. But the throngs of people in the hills of Galilee have heard about John's death too, and so they follow after Jesus asking Him to heal them and talk to them. So Jesus stops His climb up the mountain to solitude to stop and take care of them. And He does this all day long. And then, of course, because they're human, they get hungry, and then we have the story of the five loaves and the two fish.

At last, it's late and our passage tells us...in my Bible it says that Jesus constrained His disciples to get into their boat and head out across the Sea of Galilee. That is constrain. He has to urge His disciples to leave Him. And so then He goes and He sends the crowd away. I like to think that Jesus just didn't say *Good-bye* and walk away. I think Jesus probably stood there and shook hands and smiled and talked to them individually. Maybe He let them touch Him or even hug each person. But, finally, he makes His way up the mountainside to be alone and to pray.

In this, I think, Jesus gives us a wonderful example of renewal that all of us sometimes need a time to find a quiet place where we can just be by ourselves and talk with God. I know that I need times like this, time to re-center, to refocus, to think about the happenings of the day, to think about my own feelings and my own emotions...just a time to talk with God. And it's in these times of solitude with God that I find solace and am able to face another day. But then I'm an introvert, and I like to believe that Jesus was an introvert, too. It was alone that Jesus found peace and the strength to face humanity and His disciples again.

So, having been renewed, Jesus walks down the mountainside, and He approaches the shore of Galilee. It's in the early hours of the morning, our passage says, and a storm is forming and it's tossing the disciples' boat back and forth, and back and forth.

I think I know what it must have been like for the disciples. A couple of Sundays ago – after church of course – my family took our small boat out on Shawano Lake and we put in. And as we were putting in, we noticed a few gray clouds and even some rumbling thunder off in the distance. And we were basically too ignorant to be afraid. So we take off, but sure enough, within ten, fifteen minutes, it began to rain. And a few minutes later, it began to pour and pour. And, finally, it was just coming down in sheets. And we turned around to try to head back to the dock, and by this time it was dark and the wind was really blowing, and we couldn't see more than a few yards in front of us. We were just a little concerned to say the least. Luckily, my daughter was able to recognize a few trees that she thought was where the dock was, and so we headed in that direction. And, sure enough, the dock was there and we were safe and sound. We could have used Jesus walking out to us.

Well, back aboard the disciples' boat, the disciples are what? They're afraid. They're so often afraid. They've done what Jesus asked of them, after all, you know. He told them to sail out into the sea and now a storm is threatening to capsize them and drown them, for goodness sakes.

In my work as a chaplain, I have had the privilege to work with many people from many walks of life that have been facing their own storm and were afraid. I worked as a hospital chaplain at the Medical College of Virginia, in Richmond, Virginia, before moving here to Green Bay. And in my time there I met a woman of courage and faith. Now she had made some poor choices in her life, along with some good ones I think, too. She had been an alcoholic who had been in her words: "dabbled in drugs." And when her children were young, she decided to leave her husband, their father, and start over.

Now I'd like to say at this point she cleaned herself up, and got a job, and was a wonderful mother, and became a productive citizen, but that was not her story. She did, however, have bouts of clearness and lucidity, and in those times she moved closer to her family and to her church. Her children grew up and went out on their own, and in time she finally stopped abusing and she remarried. She started working at a daycare center and she volunteered at women's shelter. She had done what God had asked, and her life was good.

Then on one dark and rainy night, her car slid off her side of the lane and went into another lane. And she was broadsided by another car and left her dying in the middle of the road...bleeding. And she was rushed to the emergency room which is where I met her. She was scared. The storm – her storm – was heavily upon her. I was with her again several days later when the doctors told her that she would be paralyzed from the neck down for the rest of her life.

But let's get back to our gospel story. The storm is upon the disciples, and they are afraid. Then they see this figure – this ghost – walking out to them, and they're even more afraid. They think they're seeing this ghost. They don't know what they're seeing. They don't even recognize Jesus. They don't recognize Jesus even though at this point they've been with Jesus for quite some time. And then the figure says...again in my Bible it says: ***Be of good cheer***, which is kind of an odd thing to say, isn't it? You're walking on water, and the waves are rolling, and Your disciples are scared, and Jesus says: ***Be of good cheer***. I'm not sure how that was taken, but He says: ***Be of good cheer***. And then He says: ***It is I***. Whew! And the disciples are relieved. Ah, okay, everything's going to be okay now.

And then Peter, the lead disciple, he gets excited, all right. He says: ***Oh, I'm going to be like Jesus. I'm going to walk on that water right beside Him.*** The gospels of Mark and John have the account of Jesus walking on the water, but they don't mention Peter walking on the water. Matthew is the only one that adds Peter, and I think Matthew adds Peter's account of walking on the water because it adds a whole new human aspect to the story. It's the part of the story I like the best.

I have to admit, I think it would be awesome to be able to walk on top of the water. Wouldn't it? I mean, the other disciples would be impressed, plus it would just be cool, or as my son would say: ***It would be sweet!*** It would be sweet.

At any rate, I'm right there with Peter. You know, I would be saying: ***Ooh, me too, Jesus! Me too! Let me! Let me! I want to walk on the water.*** Right?

In actuality, I have walked on water...really! Long time ago, I jumped off the New River Bridge in West Virginia. Don't worry. I wasn't suicidal. It was Bridge Day, and I was a skydiver. And so two of my friends and I drove to West Virginia, and we took the 876-foot jump off the bridge. And as I was coming in to land – my parachute opened; everything was fine – and as I was coming in to land on a little jut of land that was sticking out, my feet just skimmed along the top of the water to the landing point. So I was walking on water. Of course I was cheating because I had a parachute to hold me up.

Well, as our story goes, Peter climbs out of the boat. He takes a step or two and then, with every fiber of his being, he says: ***Aaaah, this is impossible! This is crazy. What am I doing out here? I can't walk on water.*** And he begins to sink, and he sticks his hand out and he says: ***Save me!*** And Jesus grabs onto him. Right?

So let me back up. He's looking around, and he knows he's in over his head, and he starts to sink. I think how alike we are. Have you ever had an experience like that? One of the other things my family has done since moving to Wisconsin is we've taken up snow skiing. But we're quite the novices. I know that I can go downhill very fast. And it's as I'm going downhill very fast and I look around and realize how fast I'm going and realize that I have no idea what I'm doing that I get scared and start wobbling and my skis start, you know, jumping up and down. And the next thing you know, I'm tumbling down the hill. Right? Or, if I'm making a presentation to a hospital and I look into the audience and I realize with fear that people know I'm in over my head, that's when I start to fumble.

Or like Melissa, who lived after the car accident and cried out to God that she couldn't do the things she loved anymore that she couldn't live life as a quadriplegic. It was crazy to expect her to.

But the writer of Matthew says that Peter yelled out to Jesus: ***Save me!*** And he stretched out his arms toward Jesus, and Jesus reached out and grabs Peter's arm. And Jesus saves Peter. And Jesus holds on and He says: ***Oh, yea of little faith.*** Now I like to think Jesus is chuckling as He says that – you know, ***Peter! Peter! Yea of little faith! Diane! Diane! Yea of little faith! Why did you doubt? Why did you doubt? Why DID you doubt?***

We doubt because we're human. We doubt because sometimes we don't understand. We doubt because things sometimes just don't make sense. Sometimes we doubt because it's easier than walking on water. It's easier than risking.

Not long after the accident, Melissa did die in her sleep peacefully. The church was packed at her funeral. You see, Melissa has reached out her hand just as Peter did on those wavy, rough seas, and Jesus' hand had been found. She learned to reach out to others and to share of herself with her words, with her very being. In the months before her death, her room door was always open, and the staff and other patients were always coming in and out of her room, laughing, and crying, and sharing their stories. Melissa risked walking on water every day. She risked putting herself out there, letting others know her, loving others and caring for others. And when she felt she was sinking, she reached out to Jesus to save her. Maybe, like the disciples, she didn't even recognize Jesus at first.

In the past few sermons, Chuck has been preaching to us – Dr. Mize – has been preaching to us about love. God loves us forever, and God loves us enough to wrestle with us. And I remember as a youth, my church saying: *Oh, God loves you* and thinking, in my thinking: *So? You might as well tell me that tree over there loves me. What I need is a flesh and blood, you know, person to love me.* Well, it wasn't until later that my eyes were opened, and I learned to recognize God, that God does have hands, and voice, and eyes, and flesh, and blood...in you, and you, and you, and you, and in me.

In my current work with a hospital here in Wisconsin, I serve as an educator, and my students are primarily a clergy of varying denominations. And we work to understand our role as clergy and to gain a deeper understanding of our own personal stories and how those stories impact our ministry and how we can be more effective in our ministry.

In one class, one of my students told us how she has faithfully given her life to the church, how she's worked tirelessly in her ministry. And now, as she enters fully into middle age, she's begun to realize her own mortality. She told of how she agonizes over how she, a woman of faith who has served her church for some twenty years, how she now fears death. And with tears streaming down her face, she told of what she really fears is dying all alone with no one really caring and her life having had no meaning.

Well, at first the other students and I all jumped in with reassurance – *Oh that would never happen. You're loved. That's impossible!* – only to realize that our denial of her feelings was not very comforting for her. With effort, we began to show some empathy. We began to really listen to what she was saying. We began to sit with her in her own pain – and in our pain – and began to express our feelings of sadness and grief.

Later that day, she stated that that experience of the class sitting with her in her pain was like being surrounded in an envelope of warmth. She risked walking on water by sharing her vulnerability with us, and she found Jesus' hand in us. She experienced God's presence and God's love in a life-altering way.

We all have times we are afraid. I hope that we all have times when we risk sharing of ourselves, when we risk being known, when we risk getting out of the boat and stepping on to

that water. And just when we start to sink, we reach out and find that others are there and that Jesus' hand has grabbed us. God is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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