

Pentecost 13 Year A 2008

Proper 14

Texts: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b

Romans 10:5-15

Matthew 14:22-33

“ Take Heart, it is I; do not be afraid” Matthew 14:27

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Today is a very special day in our life together here at St. Matthew’s. In a few moments we will baptize Sophie Marie Miller and Owen Connor Benkert. I say “we” because although I am the one to pour water over their heads and seal them with the sign of the cross, it is you, this family of faith that will welcome them on behalf of the larger family they will now be a part of, God’s family, the Church.

It is you, and their parents and godparents that are to help ensure that they know of God’s love for them and God’s gift of grace to them in the sacrament they are about to receive. Baptism is amazing because it is about God choosing us before we ever have the opportunity to choose him. Baptism is amazing because it is not about us saying “yes” to God so much as it is God saying “yes” to us.

Baptism is the beginning of a journey in faith and life, in all its difficulties and all its glory. And it is a shared journey. It is a journey we never make alone. It is a journey that is always made in community. When we help to raise a child in the Christian faith and life we engage in what Martin Luther has described as “the noblest and most precious work on earth.”¹

To be a priest and to baptize individuals into this Christian faith and life, to be a parent or Godparent and to share the story of Jesus with others who are growing in the faith is an incredible privilege. As is often the case in our Christian faith, the symbols of what is important to us, what speaks to the extraordinary love of God for us, are the simple elements of life. Today that symbol is water.

¹ Anderson, Herbert and Edward Foley *Mighty Stories and Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*, (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 1998), p. 70

So it is appropriate that we have for our gospel reading today a story where water plays such a prominent role; where discipleship and doubt, faith and risk come colliding together all in one man named Peter.

After feeding the 5,000, Jesus sends the disciples off into a boat to go to the “other side” into gentile territory. Jesus, after dismissing the crowds, goes into the hillside by himself to pray. He prays late into the night. It is around 4 in the morning that Jesus returns to his disciples but by that time they were a long way off. The wind was strong and the waves high and rough. The boat was being tossed around. Jesus walks to his friends who are terrified by what they see thinking that Jesus is a ghost. Jesus tells them, “Take heart, it is I; have no fear.”

Obviously God knew us to be anxious and fearful creatures because over 100 times in scripture we are admonished to not be afraid. In fact, “have no fear” or “do not be afraid” is the most repeated phrase in the entire Bible.

Peter, that wonderfully faithful yet equally doubting and impetuous disciple says, “If that really is you Jesus, let me do what you are doing. If you really are Jesus you will let me walk on water too!” Jesus has only one word for Peter, “Come.” That’s it. No explanation, no telling Peter how to do it, just that Peter is to come to him.

Then Peter, God bless him, gets out of the boat! Peter takes some wobbly, tentative, toddler-like steps in faith. In order for Peter to take Jesus at his word, in order for him to test Jesus and to see if Jesus will be faithful to his word, Peter has to first get out of the boat! Peter must take the risk that Jesus will indeed be there for him, that Jesus will give him what he needs in order to come to him.

In the face of stiff head wind Peter begins to fear and as he does he begins to sink. And immediately Peter calls out to Jesus to save him. Jesus, in what I believe is a loving rebuke says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Often the message taken away from this story is about Peter’s lack of faith. But Jesus doesn’t tell Peter that he has no faith; he does have faith. He has enough faith to get out of that boat, to take the risk that Jesus really will be with him. The message here is that Peter, when the going got tough began to doubt that Jesus would stay with him. Peter, as soon as he realizes he can’t do

it on his own calls out to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” and Jesus reaches out and does that very thing.²

This story is not about no faith, or too little faith, it is about risk, it is about getting out of our boats and doing something and, when we get in over our heads, turning to Jesus and crying out, “Lord, save me!” knowing that Jesus will indeed save us.

In thinking about Peter getting out of the boat I thought of Sophie and Owen. In a few months time they will be taking their first wobbly, tentative, toddler-like steps. They will be looking to you to guide them, to let them go, to let them take the risk of walking on their own. They will at first be grinning at you and then when they realize you are not holding on to them they will teeter sidewise and fall over, looking surprised and hurt. You will stretch out your hands, help them up and will whisper to them, “That’s Ok. I know you can do this. I won’t leave you.” And that response is what will give them the courage to get up and try again.

All of us are little Sophies and little Owens, toddler-like in our steps out in faith. Wobbly in our belief sometimes. Wondering if everything that life has to throw at us will simply overwhelm us, wondering if we can really do this thing called living a Christian life.

There is no doubt that life is going to be difficult, sometimes more difficult than we could ever imagine. There is illness and death, tragedies that leave us stunned, numb and overwhelmed. But we have a Lord and Savior that can calm the chaos of our lives. We are never promised that our lives and lives of those we love will be problem free. We are never promised that our lives won’t be touched by profound sadness or hurt. What we are promised is that we will not be left alone at such times. Not left alone by God, not left alone by the community of faith.

We are told that it is Ok to get out of the boat. We are told that is really is Ok to try something new and venture out in our walk to Christ. This story doesn’t tell us that we won’t sink when we try; it tells us that we won’t drown! We won’t drown because God’s hand will lift us up. God’s hand will lift us up through the hands of countless others in the family of God.

² The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, vol. VIII p. 329

We are all baptized into a community, a community that will help us risk in order to grow, a community that says to one another, “We are here for you to share in your joys and to shoulder your burdens and sorrows. We are here for you in moments when your faith is strong, but especially when your faith is weak. We are here for you when the winds of opposition and uncertainty cause you to fear and doubt.”

Peter called out to Jesus not in moments of certainty but precisely in moments of fear and doubt. Doing that is what saved Peter, literally and figuratively. It is what will save us as well.

Amen.