

THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 13, 2023

1 KINGS 19:9-18 | PSALM 85:8-13 | ROMANS 10:5-15 | MATTHEW 14:22-

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If you visit a doctor, a car mechanic, a therapist, maybe an exterminator, they'll probably start by asking you the same question. *What seems to be the problem?* Hopefully you have an idea. Sore back. Engine rattling. Anxiety. Rats. It's impossible to know how to make things better if we don't know what's going awry in the first place.

The same idea is true for us as the people of God. In Marcus Borg's book *The Heart of Christianity*, he has a great little section where he talks about the problems we find ourselves in and the solutions that get us back on track. The one that we tend to talk about a lot in church is sin. We sin, we turn away from God and neighbor. The solution is to be forgiven and given another chance. That's what we do each week in our rite of confession and forgiveness.

But as he points out, there are other problems, too. Ones that come from scripture, but that we don't talk about in church a whole lot. The Exodus story is a story about oppression. The problem is we don't have freedom to love God and neighbor fully, so we need to be liberated. There's also the story of the Exile which is about disorientation and disconnection. To live a full life, we need to be given a new orientation and reconnected with our neighbors.

Today's gospel reading offers us yet another problem and solution. It's a problem and solution so important that this story shows up in three of the four gospels. Matthew, Mark, and John all tell us about Jesus walking on water. They're all a little different, but what ties them together is a common problem: fear.

Our culture has a kind of cognitive dissonance when it comes to fear. On the one hand, we're told constantly that we should be afraid. You should be afraid of books. You should be afraid of immigrants. You should be afraid of cities. The list goes on and on. On the other hand, it's easy to get the idea that fear is some kind of moral failure. "You can't live your whole life in fear," we're told. So throw away your fire alarms, skip that biopsy, and hit the links during that thunderstorm.

Fear is also invoked throughout St. Matthew's gospel. And Matthew sees fear not as an emotional reaction to something or a kind of safety precaution but as a kind of restraining force. That force becomes a problem when it prevents you from engaging in anything outside of what you already know. The fear that Matthew is talking about is a kind of path dependency. We're afraid of the new, so we just do what we know.

So it's important that in Matthew's gospel, when people are told to not be afraid, it's not just a general piece of advice. It's usually paired up with something positive. Something that represents new creation. At the beginning of the gospel, Joseph is told *Don't be afraid... take Mary as your wife*. At the Transfiguration, the disciples are told *Don't be afraid... come follow me*. At the end of the gospel, the women at the empty tomb are told *Don't be afraid... go and tell the disciples that Christ is raised*. In all those different situations, fear is played off against newness. It's not just *Don't be afraid*. It's *Don't let fear prevent you from encountering what new things God is doing in the world*.

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We know what it's like to live from fear. It makes our world smaller, narrower, less diverse, less interesting. Rather than live in a world where we occasionally feel decentered or confused or off-kilter, we just get used to living a little bit *less*. As one of our rites puts it, when we are constrained by fear, "we do not enjoy the life our Creator intended for us." That's the problem.

So what's the solution? Well, you may remember that I mentioned that this story shows up in three of the gospels. That's sort of true. But Matthew is the only one who tells us about Peter. And Matthew makes a point of telling us about Peter because he wants us to understand the solution, what frees us from that constricting fear.

And it's faith. Throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus invites people to step out of their known reality into the kingdom of heaven and trust that God will meet them along the way. That's true for Joseph, the disciples, the women at the empty tomb. And now it's true for Peter. Peter is just different because he literally steps out to follow Jesus into something unknown. And what does Peter discover when he does? He finds that he can walk on water. That something is new and present and real that was beyond his expectations or imagination.

You can probably think of examples of this from your own life. Times and places where the fear of newness has given way to something new and life-giving. One from our ministry together that comes to mind. A number of years ago, we went to an event at the Islamic Center in Midland Park. This was probably 2019. And they had evening prayers with some speakers. And then they invited us to their fellowship hall for dinner. And I was chatting with someone about it after, and they said, I'm paraphrasing, "You know, I was really nervous about going. Because I see so much on the news about Muslims that tells me I'm supposed to be afraid of them. But then I sat down and ate with them, and I realized that we had a lot in common."

That's the kind of fear that Matthew's talking about. A fear that prevents us from engaging with the world around us. And that's also the kind of faith Matthew's talking about. Faith that empowers us to step outside of our comfort zone and enter something new. In this case a new relationship with and understanding of our neighbors.

Like Peter, we may be intimidated at the prospect of taking that first step. The waves seem high. The wind feels strong. Jesus seems an awfully long way away. At those moments when faith and fear seem to co-exist side by side, we turn to prayer. This is how Thomas Merton prayed in those moments. He writes, "My Lord God, / I have no idea where I am going. / I do not see the road ahead of me. / I cannot know for certain where it will end / nor do I really know myself, / and the fact that I think I am following your will / does not mean that I am actually doing so... Therefore will I trust you always though / I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. / I will not fear, for you are ever with me, / and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

We shall not fear, for Christ is ever with us. And he gives us the faith to know that we never face our perils alone.

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