

13th Sunday after Pentecost
Text: Matthew 14: 22-23
Preacher: Vicar, Jim Goodyear

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.
August 10, 2008

“You Want Me to do WHAT?”

Each summer, my sons would spend one full week with me. Together we would do things around the house and take day trips to local museums or parks or spend time with other family members around the pool. One summer I decided to take my sons to camp. Camp Nawakwa is a church camp of the Lower Susquehanna Synod like Bear Creek here in Southeast Penn synod. Nawakwa holds a special place in my heart. It is where my mother went to camp as a young girl and she introduced it to my brothers and me. It is also where I worked the summer before my senior year in high school. Nawakwa is where I learned to appreciate the beauty of nature and truly experience God's creative power. I wanted to share this special place with my sons. I picked up a summer camp brochure and saw they offered a “Family Camp”. I read on and soon realized this would be my opportunity to introduce Nawakwa to Brad and Bryan.

Both boys had been to scout camps before but not a church camp. I talked to Brad and Bryan about this camp, even taking them there for a visit off season just to show them around. They seemed excited and curious at the same time. That is until we received a letter from a ‘veteran’ camp family. This family wanted to introduce us to family camp and what we might expect during the week. In their letter, they outlined a typical day beginning with breakfast, then bible study, lunch, recreation, dinner, evening worship, and evening activities. As soon as my sons heard, bible study followed by worship they in unison cried out, “WHAT?” Dad, you want us to do what – go to camp and talk about God? They envisioned camp as a place to play games, swim in the pool and have fun times all day long. After some negotiating, we agreed to try family camp for one year. If they did not like it, we would never go back. The first day of camp, I took Brad to his group for bible study and told him where to meet me afterward. When the bible study was finished, I waited twenty minutes before Brad went running by saying, “this is fun dad, see you later!” After that, the only times I saw Brad was at mealtime and bed time. It took Bryan till Wednesday to feel the same way. I believe they enjoyed it because on the way home they asked if we could go back again. We did for the next five years. As a family we also made new friends that to this day we still keep in contact with even though we have not been to camp in over ten years. Nawakwa must have made an impression on Brad, because Camp Nawakwa was where he and Meghan exchanged wedding vows three years ago with many of the family campers present.

Matthew tells us in today's text, that Jesus went off to pray up into the mountains to be alone in prayer. It was a long day; he had just fed the five thousand men plus women and children. Jesus sent the disciples on their way to be alone. He told them to go on ahead. He would meet them later. Jesus knew where the disciples would be and that they would probably

face a storm. The Sea of Galilee is known for its sudden storms. As the evening wore on, sure enough rough seas soon engulfed the boat. When Jesus went to the lakeshore to join his disciples he noticed the disciples were far out into the sea struggling to keep the boat afloat. The winds were whipping and tossing the boat about. It seemed like the disciples had lost control of the boat. So Jesus started to walk out to join them to help calm them.

Imagine if you were one of the disciples on that boat. Delirious from being tossed about at sea, tired from a busy day. You look out across the water and see an image walking toward you. There is no way a person can walk on water. But here it was an image of a person walking on water. I could understand how it might look like a ghost. Even as Jesus got closer and identified himself, one of them, Peter, questioned him. He had doubts and fears. Peter wanted to make sure. “If it is you, command me to walk across the water.” Kind of like I dare you to make me walk across the water. Peter steps out of the boat and begins to walk toward Jesus. He actually takes a few steps then realizes the winds blowing around him and begins to sink, crying out, ‘save me’. Jesus reaches out and says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Jesus knew what the disciples were facing. He knew of their struggles to keep their boat afloat. He knew the safety of the boat was in danger. Jesus reached out in their time of fear and calmed them.

I find it ironic that Peter, the rock, the cornerstone, the foundation of the Christian church has doubts. He doubts the person he sees really is Jesus; that he can walk on water; afraid he will drown in the sea. Peter is perhaps best known as the one who would deny Jesus three times before his crucifixion. Peter is often referred to as one of the pillars of the church, one of the saints. Who is a saint? The definition I hold onto for saint is ‘not a person who never fails; but a person who gets up and goes on again every time he or she fails’. Peter had failed to walk on the water, but he got up again with the help of Jesus and went on.

Another saint we often refer to is Paul. Both of these men ‘stepped out of the boat’, out of the confines of certainty around their lives often with fear and trepidation to discover God was there to hold them; to carry them through their fears. Even though Peter lost faith and began to sink; even though he denied Jesus three times, it was Peter the one with doubts and fears who preached to the masses in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost following the Lord's ascension to heaven; from doubter to a pillar of the church. I wonder how many times Peter asked, “You want me to do what?” Walk across the water, deny you three times, heal the sick, cure the lame....

Through all Peter’s fears and doubts, Jesus holds out his hand and pulls Peter into the boat. There are no questions asked of ‘why’, instead a loving, caring hand to bring someone to safety. Jesus encouraged Peter to come to him across the water knowing full well, he was doomed to sink. The unconditional love of Jesus held out his hand when the going got tough. It was Jesus who brought him back to the safety of the boat. Even the winds subsided when Jesus joined the disciples. In their hour of need, Jesus came to help them.

How many times have you heard the question, “You want me to do WHAT?” in your life? You want me to go to seminary God. You’ve got to be out of your mind! Give up the comfort of a good job, leave behind all that I know, do something I feel inadequate for. For me, these questions come in different forms almost every day. They may not be as life changing as a career, but I often am faced with leaving the comfort of the known. Perhaps you too have faced similar situations.

Doubts and fears of the unknown surround us every day. There are decisions that have to be made at a moments notice. You may not have the luxury of evaluating options to determine which might give the better feeling of comfort. I’ve often heard and said on occasion too, ‘take a leap of faith’ or ‘go for it’. Leaving behind the comforts that we become accustomed too raises our sense of fear further complicated by doubt. “I doubt I can do that...” or ‘there is no way that can be done’. It is human nature to want to doubt and fear what might be. While at the same time, we know God is with us.

Having doubts and fears reminds me of watching my sons learn to walk. At one point I doubted they would walk. First they learned to rollover. Eventually they could pull themselves up with the aid of a chair or table. When they felt steady, one foot would go in front of the other. Now I feared he would fall and hurt himself. Soon they were walking. It was only after many attempts they could walk across the room. A few steps at a time, tumble to the floor, pull up again, and try again. Isn’t that the way our faith is? We take a few steps at a time, feel like we are falling, then pull ourselves up again. I remember running to him many times, to catch him before he took a tumble.

Then there are other times our faith might feel like the cartoon of the coyote chasing the roadrunner off the cliff. The roadrunner always makes it across the gap, but every time the coyote, halfway across, becomes aware that there is nothing beneath his feet, he stops cold, then plummets down. We think we know what is going on, then suddenly become aware of our surroundings and then fall. The bottom falls out below us.

What is God calling this congregation to do? Where is God leading us in this community? Who are we as the congregation of St. Peter in Lafayette Hill in the world? I do not have the answers. Well, maybe I do have one answer. Whenever I would tell local folk I was going to be at St. Peter’s for my internship, the comment would quickly go to “oh, that’s the church that does the Boar’s Head thing every year!” Although I have not yet experienced a St. Peter’s Boar’s Head, I do know it is one way in which this congregation brings the message of Jesus to the community around us.

Summer is quickly coming to a close. The days are getting shorter. There are countless sales for school supplies. I noticed the color guard practicing on the front lawn of PW high school the other day. In fact, I think the NFL season starts up in about four weeks. I have heard

comments the past few weeks that just wait till September vicar, things really get moving around here. The fall is often a time to start up new things, to rekindle old things, a time to stay in the boat of comfort or to take a step out and be led by God through the Holy Spirit.

I know we are in need of Sunday School teachers. Maybe you have even said, “I can’t do that. The kids are smarter than me.” I think the truth of the matter is, the children really do want to know about your faith. They may not be able to articulate what faith is, but who can! Surely there are other ministries that can use your gifts. When God makes possible the things for which we clearly ask, we are often not ready to accept and live into them. How shallow is our faith that we can’t even acknowledge and accept the things God gives us that are right in front of our face. When we don’t listen to the wind, and other voices around us we deny the reality of God’s gifts to us. God has entrusted us to have the wisdom and integrity of character to accept the gifts so freely given. But we cry out to be saved. We cry out even though Christ is right beside us to be with us and guide us. We cry out as though we are helpless and unable to grasp the confidence God has in us.

Our relationship with Jesus lets us step out of the comfortable boat, and more importantly lets us call for help when we feel we are sinking. It was Jesus’ love for his disciple that sent him into the storm in the first place. Just as Jesus encouraged Peter to come out and walk on the water, Jesus does the same for us. As we start to falter, Jesus holds out his compassionate hand and keeps us from sinking. Jesus knows our limitations. He knows how much we can handle. All the while, Jesus is encouraging us to continue on the path of faith. It is like he is our cheerleader saying, ‘you’re doing it. Don’t give up now’. I will hold you as my own.

Many times I feel as if I’m on my own in my boat after Jesus has sent me ahead to cross the sea while he stays behind to tie up a few loose ends, There have been days and weeks when I’ve felt as if I were steering my boat against the wind and the waves. And many times I have known the presence of God, as unlooked for and frightening as a ghost, coming to me as I struggle. As I search for the words for a sermon, or as I respond to someone else’s need, I feel Jesus’ invitation to step out of my boat, to leave behind the safe and the practical in order to toddle toward him. I have felt the cool of the water under the soles of my feet. Many times as well I have known the moments of realizing that the task is impossible and I am too limited to carry it out. It is at those times I have felt the many ways Jesus reaches out his hand to catch me -- in the love of family and friends, the sustenance of spiritual practice, the bonds of community and the moments of unexplainable peace in the midst of the struggle and the failure. But, like Peter, I can step forward, even if the ground beneath me is no more substantial than water. What matters is that I am walking toward Jesus, whose hand is held toward me, stretched out in invitation, stretched out to grasp me should I fall.

The next time you are faced with the question, “You want me to do what?” step out of the boat and let Jesus lead you on. His love will not let you sink.