

“You May Sink, You May Defy Gravity”

Matthew 14:22-35

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Out in N.Y. City there is a subway construction project taking place. It is in many ways a very complex project because there are layers of sewers, gas lines, water mains, electrical lines, trains and all kinds of stuff below the surface of the street to be careful of. On top of all the things to work around, the subway tunnel and all its complicated elements takes a long time to build.

So this project is a long term project – they’ve been at it for years already, and it’s not scheduled to be completed for years to come.

For the people who live and work near the major subway worksite, life has not been pleasant. There is constant noise, loud noise, there is gummed up traffic, businesses have fewer customers, it’s been a hot, hot summer and tensions in the area are running high. People are mad, frustrated, tired.

But something creative, odd and pleasing has emerged at one of the work sights.

A construction worker has decided that during his lunch hour he will set up his karaoke machine, a microphone and speakers and he is singing to the people on the street each day. He wears his hard hat, but he croons with a voice that some say resembles Frank Sinatra’s. He sings a lot of old songs like “Mack the Knife”, “Stardust” and “Moon River.” And the crowds love him. They line up to hear him and get his autograph.

I don’t really know how good he is, but he seems to be a great gift to this tension filled neighborhood. He himself said he just likes to sing and he thought it would help the situation around his work site. So one day, maybe with some encouragement, he took the plunge and risked making a fool of himself and providing something people might enjoy in contrast to the construction.

It’s a confounding thing when people step out of the shadows not knowing exactly what will happen, but for some reason they take the risk hoping that some bit of life will be stirred into joy, or beauty, or wonder.

At the very center of Jesus' teachings is the encouragement, and at times the demand for people to take risks. I know that Christianity is often thought to be a stabilizing force in the world. People like Karl Marx and Ayn Rand have taken pleasure in labeling our Christian faith an opiate, a sedative, a straight jacket, a religion to monitor people's lives so that no one gets out of line.

I understand something of their criticism. Historically Christianity has denounced things that might give joy – dancing, singing, having parties; it has denounced science, progress, anything new; it has denounced global cultures, the wilderness and just about anything that doesn't go along with what powerful leaders think. Christianity was said to support the concept of a superior race, the horrors of apartheid and slavery, the exploitation of the planet and more.

These are tragic elements of our Christian history, but they do not reflect or represent Jesus' teachings in any way. Rather than serving to suppress joy, justice and hope, Jesus' teachings, and therefore the desire of God's heart, really promote freedom, taking risks, even foolishly doing those things that might bring God's kingdom to light.

Let me say that risk taking like bungee jumping, extreme sports and placing bets in Las Vegas are not the types of risks Jesus promoted – thrill seeking and playing the lottery are distractions and novelties with little connection to what Jesus cared about.

We have only to look at today's scripture passages that Wendy read, to know what I am talking about.

The Hebrew story of Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons, is the story of a man who took risks. He took the risk of listening to dreams, of speaking the truth, of remaining faithful to God. The results of all his risk taking were sometimes difficult and sometimes critically important for his people. It is not the ease of our days that the Bible and God offer, it is the wonder of living that constitutes God's gift.

Even more to the point is the story of Peter stepping out onto the stormy waters of Galilee.

I know that our gospel passage is typically titled, “Jesus walks on the water,” and it is Jesus’ miraculous powers that gets our attention. But I believe that it is Jesus’ relationship to Peter and the disciples that is most important. If Jesus is the inspiration, then Peter is the human response in the story.

Jesus’ followers, including you and I, are prone to celebrate the inspirational person of Jesus, but what Jesus wants are responders.

So Jesus walks out to the boat at the darkest hour of the night, the rain is falling, the wind is blowing and the waves are crashing. A picture has been painted for us of life’s tumult, and all we are to do is recognize our lives or the lives of others in the midst of these struggles. Some of the prayers we lift up on Sunday mornings paint the familiar storm – loved ones with cancer, people starving in the horn of Africa, dysfunctional governments and our own tiredness as our hearts are broken by it all.

As Jesus approaches the disciple’s boat in the midst of the storm, Peter looks out and says “how does he do it? How does he keep from sinking after just presiding over feeding 5,000 people knowing that in a few hours he will be swamped with sick people needing to be healed? How does he do it? How does he not sink below the waves?”

The critical moment comes when Peter sheepishly asks if he can join Jesus out on the water. Now you might think that Jesus the good shepherd, Jesus the miraculous, Jesus the Messiah, would tell Peter to stay in the boat and Jesus would make the storm go away, but he doesn’t. Jesus doesn’t strip Peter of what little hope and power he has, instead he tells Peter to step out with him.

Take the risk, don’t fear the storm, all that is mine is yours too. Jesus doesn’t just want to be an inspiration, he wants to be a companion. Come out on the water with me.

God’s desire as we see in the person of Jesus, is for us to take the risk of walking on water, to recognize the storm but not be lost in it, to experience our limits without being paralyzed by them.

As soon as I say this I hear the voice in the back of my head whispering – “yeah, but Peter begins to sink and has to be rescued, you will sink too!”

This voice is right, I will sink, we will sink, but we also have the promise that at some time, in some way we will be pulled up. As one of our Christian proverbs state: “We are promised strength for the journey and peace in the end.”

The point of the Jesus walking on water story isn’t that Jesus is miraculously different from all of us, if that were the case then God would have had no reason to be born in human form. The point of the story is to reveal what is possible if we are willing to step out onto the water with Jesus, if we are willing to trust the divine presence that is in, around, and between us.

Over the years most of us have had times of inspiration and we have in some way stepped out onto disturbed but important waters. I know college graduates who are taking their first professional jobs. They are passionate about the work they have trained for but their training didn’t include the fact that people are hard to work with, the systems in which they work are imperfect, even obstacles, and it can be emotionally draining to do what they feel called to do. These are things you only learn when you step out of the boat.

And I know people who reach out as a volunteer to serve others and the world. They step out into unknown waters because they see a way that they can help build a better world. But when they take the risk they find that people are hard to work with, programs don’t flow smoothly, money is limited and it can be emotionally draining.

The reality of stepping out of the boat is that most of us start to sink at some point and we know we need help. When Peter stepped on to the water and then began to sink he reached up and asked for help, and help came. This is a description of what it means to live faithfully. To live faithfully is to be out on the water, to take risks when we feel called to do so, to encounter the difficulties that come our way, to call out when we need help trusting that somehow God will grab us and pull us up.

Living faithfully is a messy matter, but it is also a beautiful journey that can touch our hearts and fill our cup to overflowing.