

## ‘Little Faith’ Sunday

*A sermon preached on Sunday, August 13, 2017, the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, at St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Bedford, New York by the The Rev. David Rider, President & Executive Director of The Seamen’s Church Institute of New York & New Jersey*

Good morning. It’s great to be with you on this beautiful, bucolic Sunday morning. I serve as the Executive Director of the Seamen’s Church Institute, which has extended outreach and hospitality on behalf of New York Episcopalians to seafarers visiting our Port since 1834. In this spirit, let me clarify that I did not choose today’s story of Jesus’ and Peter’s walking on water—it’s part of our regular lectionary cycle—though I admit it’s a wonderful tee-up for a preacher who works at sea.

Our story from Matthew’s Gospel has near-parallels in both Mark and Luke, though only Matthew tells us about Peter’s walking on the water after Jesus. (John’s Gospel has a post-resurrection story about Jesus on the water without Peter’s doing the same.) So Matthew likely wants us to know about Peter (perhaps representing all humanity), in addition to Jesus’ divine ability.

Remember that in Scripture, ‘crossing the lake’ often suggests a tension between Judaism and the emerging new Church, between Jew and Gentile. Of course, Jesus embodies an expansive vision of God’s Kingdom, but there is hard work to go between the two cultures, work fraught with tension. Also, going out on the lake or the sea remains filled with danger. We might think of an afternoon on Long Island Sound with joy and daiquiris at the end—but boats are tormented by the wind and the ‘sea’ connotes death and the forces of chaos held at bay only by a loving God. Finally, in the Hebrew Scriptures, only God walks on the waters, so Peter’s gesture also can be read potentially as sinful hubris. It’s complicated.

In my ministry at the Seamen’s Church Institute, these themes remain true to this very day. Especially in the winter, as seafarers transit the stormy North Atlantic, God’s presence and absence (*revelatus* and *absconditus*, in the traditional Latin) take on very existential meaning. Our chaplains hear harrowing stories—often from the captain, who can confide in no one else—about the ship’s nearly going under. A seafarer’s sense of Jesus’ walking on the water to quell the storm captures his spirituality in a way that goes far beyond simple metaphor.

Back to our gospel. Notice that Jesus does not immediately still the storm. He calls out—with some exasperation but no condemnation—as those of ‘little faith.’ This phrase is used six times in the New Testament, five by Matthew, but it’s better than Mark’s depiction of Jesus chiding the disciples for having no faith. So let’s think of today as “Little Faith Sunday,” like Garrison Keillor’s quip that Lake Wobegan Lutherans are an optimistic lot, fully convinced that life’s glass is ¼ full. When we are honest, our lives vacillate from having *much* faith to *little* faith to, perhaps, *no* faith—we could spend a weekend retreat simply focused on this dimension of human anthropology. Jesus never provides simple bromides to increase faith, no self-help mantras or

quick fixes. Instead, Jesus works with us as we are, sends divine grace our way, and beckons us to “Follow me” from despair to hope and faithful discipleship.

I find the most compelling punch-line in today’s story when Jesus cries out, “Take heart, and do not be afraid, it is I.” This admonition reminds us of the resurrection story, always read on 2 Easter, when Jesus appears in the Upper Room, with words of peace and transformation that overcome fear and death. Jesus shares a core proclamation: do not be afraid. Easier said than done, perhaps, but this Gospel imperative permeates Jesus’s earthly ministry as it should permeate our lives today.

This admonition—do not be afraid—took on new meaning in the past week. Just since last Sunday, we have confronted anew the very real risk of nuclear conflagration and its capacity for unimaginable suffering. In the last 24 hours, we also have confronted the dark strain of human DNA regarding racism and anti-Semitism—including the loss of life—in the tragedy unfolding in Charlottesville. Jesus calls us not to be afraid—more proactively, he calls us to courage—so that we proclaim our baptismal commitment to respect the dignity of *every* human being and condemn the evil of Nazism and racism with deep moral clarity.

Today’s story reminds us that Christian discipleship can never be one of tepid self-help or fuzzy bromides. Rather, Jesus calls us to forsake fear in favor of courageous hope and expectation that God breaks into our world and transforms it via our faithful witness, our charitable actions, and our commitment to basic dignity in which the arc of history eventually bends toward justice. Remember that the common word for our worship space—the ‘nave’—stems from the ancient word for ‘ship’ that protects us against the stormy waters of this world. With Jesus walking beside us, we navigate the dark and anxious forces that infect this world so that we may be agents of peace, grace and blessing. We do this in Christ’s name and with full confidence in His abiding presence and blessing. While never naïve, we remain agents of hope and reconciliation in this beautiful, terrible, wonderful world.

By this peace that passes all understanding, we are dismissed from worship to serve the world in Christ’s name. In this spirit, I wish you a graceful and transformative week ahead.