

While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season
August 9, 2020 – 10th Sunday after Pentecost

*We continue in the 'green' season of Pentecost, following Jesus and his ministry as we think about the Spirit-led ministry of the Church. Here is Pastor Steve's message for The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost. A copy of the bulletin will be available to supplement "in-house" worship. We are looking forward to our **next outdoor service – Aug. 16, 2020.***

Lessons for Pentecost 10

Psalm 85:8-13; 1 Kings 19:9-18; Matthew 14:22-33

You can ask my family – wherever we travel, I like to go into churches. Whether it is a magnificent gothic cathedral or a simple stone country church or something in between, I like to go in and explore: how it is decorated? What saints or scenes will I find? Where and how large is the baptismal font? What decorations surround the altar? One item that always intrigues me – what picture is part of the main altar? In the Town Church in Wittenberg, the altar picture shows the Last Supper – the disciples sitting at a round table. Their faces show a remarkable resemblance to some of the Wittenberg town figures who were alive when Cranach painted the piece in 1547. Most altar pictures were meant to instruct and inspire worshippers and they normally depict a scene from the life of Jesus. Jesus as the Good Shepherd is a staple. You also find pictures of Jesus emerging from the tomb on Easter or Jesus ascending into heaven, and, yes, Jesus on the Cross, often with Mary and John. When I spent time in Slovakia and, yes, went into Slovakian churches, I was surprised to see not just one, but several altar paintings depicting today's Gospel lesson – the picture of Peter sinking into the Galilean Sea, frantically trying to hold his one hand out of the water in the direction of Jesus. All show the frantic Peter, all show the calm Jesus grasping the flailing hand of Peter.

Imagine how your faith might be shaped if you came to church week after week and saw this picture. Jesus grabbing the hand of Peter struggling in the rough waters of the Sea of Galilee. We can certainly imagine that Peter's faith was shaped by this event. There would be other times when Peter would struggle. He would always have the picture and the feel of Jesus' secure grip on him and his life. Do you suppose that Jesus had something in mind for Peter on that day he rescued him from drowning?

How did Peter end up in that predicament that I observed on those Slovakian altar paintings? How did Peter end up chin-deep in the water, gasping for air, grasping for rescue? What was Peter doing outside the safety of the boat, that fishing boat that he knew so well?

Blame it on Jesus. Blame it on Jesus? Remember last week, the lesson began with Jesus trying to get away by himself. Following the death of John the Baptist, Jesus was looking to retreat and regroup. His retreat was interrupted by the lunch he provided for over 5,000 with some loaves and fish. Now, all have been fed, the extra pieces have been collected, and Jesus has sent the disciples ahead. Once more he retreats to a deserted place to pray. After his time alone with God, it is time to reunite with his disciples but they are off in their boat, furlongs away. Jesus who was not daunted by having to feed 5,000 with 5 loaves, is not daunted by having to walk 500 yards on a rough sea to reach the disciples' boat.

As Jesus is making his way back to the disciples, walking on the water, they see him in the darkness. "There's a ghost! There's a ghost coming toward us on the turbulent Galilean Sea. They cry out with fear. Immediately, Jesus responds: "Take heart, it is I, have no fear."

I would like to pause right here in this sermon. Let's all take a deep breath and listen to Jesus' words again: "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." Imagine Jesus is speaking to disciples today, to us, in these turbulent times: "Take heart, it is I." Jesus is echoing the words of the Psalmist – "though the waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble . . . be still, and know that I am God." Though the virus roars and spreads like waves, though racism fomented and rocks our community lives, though fearful images fill our screens and lives – know that God is with us, a refuge and strength. Have no fear. Okay, back to the sermon.

Jesus' words came to the disciples in the darkness of the early morning, in the midst of raging waters, and calmed the fears of his disciples, certainly calmed the fears of the one named Peter. Having taken heart, he is ready to take action: "Jesus, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." Such a bold request by Peter. It will take him out of the boat, into the swirling waters. Peter does include a curious condition: "if" – "if it is really you". Is Peter still unsure about Jesus? What about those waves? Why does Peter even want to go out into the waves? Does he hope to prove himself to Jesus? Prove that he is a good disciple, ready for action no matter where that may take him? Or is Peter simply so moved by the moment and this vision of Jesus, that he forgets that there are dangerous waters that separate him from Jesus?

When Jesus says, "come", Peter is off, out of the boat. He starts well, walking to Jesus on the stormy sea. Nice! Last week, he was part of a miraculous feeding, now he is walking on water (I never mastered either in Seminary!) But, alas, Peter notices the fierce wind. He loses heart. He is afraid (as any normal disciple would be). He takes his eyes off Jesus and he sinks. He can no longer save himself. He has reached the point where only Jesus can save him. Poor Peter!

Poor Peter – but now we have Peter just where we want him. Yes, this is the Peter that we have come to love and expect. Peter, impetuous Peter, able to be bold, able to be a leading disciple, yet, able to stumble, able to say the wrong thing, or unable to say the right thing – think of his denials. This is Peter in deep trouble, literally in deep trouble, because of his own initial confidence. This is Peter who took those daring steps out of the boat.

Isn't this the Peter who speaks to us? Doesn't Peter's up and down life as a disciple of Jesus speak to us? Yes, Peter's moments of great insights and moments of great fear and doubt, speak to us as we think of the uneven paths of our own discipleship, our own walk with God. We think of rough seas that have challenged us and made it difficult to keep our eyes on Jesus, our eyes on God who says to each of us, "Come", "Come, let me be your God." Don't we feel a little better knowing that we are not alone, indeed, we walk with Peter, in our imperfect discipleship, in our failings, in our thoughts, words and deeds that fall so short of what God has in mind for us?

In case you haven't noticed, we are in fairly rough seas these days. The winds of discontent, like the winds of Isaiah on Tuesday, are strong. The coronavirus has made us fear and doubt. We fear a virus we cannot see; we doubt the words of scientists and leaders who provide guidance that on one day seems so wise and clear, on the next so overreaching and unhelpful. The pictures of protest make us fear that so much of what we have clung to is vanishing and we have doubts about our hoped-for vision that things were getting better.

In the midst of the stormy seas, Jesus said, "Come!". Yes, Jesus says, "Come!" Peter heard and followed those words, but the winds were too much, finally the water was too much. He took his eyes off Jesus and sank. Maybe this was a lesson for Peter . . . But this episode does not end with Peter sinking. Peter, who took his eyes off Jesus, understands that only Jesus can

save him. He might be a man of 'little faith', but that little faith is enough to propel Peter to hold up his hand and cry out, "Lord, save me!"

This is Peter's moment of learning, this a faith moment for Peter. He set out to come to Jesus. It did not go as planned. He needs Jesus to come to him, to come to save him – there is nothing he can do but put out his hand: "come and save me Jesus" – "I may have little faith, but I have a great hope that you will come and catch me, you will come and grab me, you will come to me and I will be saved." Thank you, Peter! Thank you, Peter, for braving those deep waters, for showing your utter helplessness, for reaching the point where only Jesus can save you so that we have a picture of Jesus doing just that – saving you! Thank you, Peter, for this picture of God's amazing grace, suitable for framing, suitable for altarpieces. This picture reminds us that when we reach our weakest points, when we doubt our own strength to get through, there is a powerful rescuer that we can find by simply reaching out our hand, inviting Jesus to take hold of it.

I see in our act of receiving Communion a reflection of Peter's encounter with Jesus on the Galilean Sea. We reach out our hand to receive the bread and the cup that invites Jesus to come to us. We say, "Jesus, I need you to come to me – with your grace, with your forgiveness, with the promise of another chance to set out in the waters of life, that can be rough and unpredictable."

Peter gives us a gift today, a picture of faith, yes, little faith, He is not commended by Jesus, but he is saved by Jesus. So, maybe we better say, Jesus gives us a picture today, something to hold on to in our lives – a picture of Jesus holding on to us when the seas of life are rough. A picture that speaks a thousand words: "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." Amen