

Sermon for 9th Sunday after Trinity – Matthew 14 22-33

The two readings morning challenged me to evaluate my personality on the risk-taking spectrum where I consider myself to be. I am not interested in parachuting out of plane or going to the racing track because am terrified of the sound of the engines of the race cars and would have the feeling something dreadful is going to happen. I usually do not choose to stir up controversy. Just picture the scene from the readings, Joseph listening to his brothers plotting whether to kill him, abandon him in a cistern, or sell him to traders. The disciples being battered in a storm in a boat, then seeing what they thought was a ghost walking on the water. Peter asking Jesus to call him to walk out on the turbulent sea to him. He made that choice. The other circumstances were pressed upon the characters in the story rather than being results of their choices. Sometimes we just find ourselves in the middle of a storm; other times we make a conscious decision to step into one.

If last week's gospel reading from Matthew – the feeding of five thousand can be read as a picture of Christian vocation, today's story can be a picture of faith or rather, the life of half faith, faith mixed with fear and doubt which is probably the state of many Christians, as it was with the disciples. Peter takes a lot of flak for his impetuous actions in this story. "There goes Peter again," we say, "true to form, talking and acting before he thinks things through." We take the words of Jesus, "Why did you doubt, O you of little faith?" as a criticism of what Peter did. What if, it was instead, encouragement to continue deepening his faith to the point where he would not sink next time? What if it was not a criticism of his wanting to walk on water to Jesus? What if "little faith" is actually sufficient? "If you had the faith of this tiny mustard seed you could tell this mountain to move and it would."

Just for a moment before we think about how today's story affects us as individuals lets first picture our world. We are like the disciples in the boat, they have seen so much of Jesus' power. They have

heard his teaching, seen his healing and prayed his prayer and yet they are now stuck. Amongst them were professional fishermen, they were struggling with the oars, unable to make a headway against the wind and waves bashing against their boat. Our world, have discovered do much, learned so much, invented so much and yet without power to do many things that matter. We have invented arms for war, but yet to find one that can make peace, we have put man on the moon but yet unable to feed the hungry. We have invented equipment to listen to whales in the deep sea but cannot hear the crying of human souls in the next street. Or presently as we grapple with how to control coronavirus which has had a devastating effect on the whole world, we still dealing with it as individual countries, or still denying that black life matters. Perhaps the reason that we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it. "If Peter had not ventured forth, had not obeyed Jesus' call to walk on the water, then Peter would never have had this great opportunity for recognition of Jesus and rescue by Jesus. I wonder if too many of us are merely splashing about in the safe shallows and therefore have too few opportunities to test and deepen our faith. The story implies that if you want to be close to Jesus, you have to venture forth out on the sea, you have to prove his promises through trusting his promises, through risk and venture." Clifton Kirkpatrick concludes, "Getting out of the boat with Jesus is the most risky, most exciting, and most fulfilling way to live life to the fullest." (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3, pp. 334-6).

But when you let your eyes drop for a moment to the waves, just like a surfer on a beach is threatened by the sudden appearance of a double sized waves and the surf board, the sunshine, the sand on the shore is replaced with darkness, fear, a howling gale force wind. It is one man against the elements, that is how it feels often when you try to bring God's love and healing power into the wild night of the world. This is when we need to hear again Jesus' words of encouragement and rebuke "You of little faith, why did you doubt". Tom Wright concludes, that "the moment we are most tempted to

give up is probably the moment when help is, if only we knew it, just a step away". Christian discipleship is like that because the early Christians as far as we know expected that of themselves. For instance, when Paul faced another shipwreck yet again, he never imagined that getting off the boat and strolling on the beach was an option. So today Matthew is inviting you to hear this story in terms of your own journey of faith, your own struggles with doubt. There will times Jesus calls us to do the impossible, how do we begin to do this task he's called us to, how can we do without that sin which we have been asked to give up, in our frantic lives how can we develop a serious habit of prayer. If like Peter we look at the waves being lashed by the strong winds, we will conclude it is impossible. But if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and our ears open for his encouragement with rebuke as well. It may seem crazy but if our wills and hearts are ready to do what he says we trust Jesus is with us. Amen.