

Sermon (Matthew 14: 22-33, 8/13/17):

I've never been big on being a dare devil risk taker. Some say there's nothing better than the thrill of feeling adrenaline coursing through your body-making your heart feel like it's going to beat out of your chest but it's just not for me.

I guess that's why I was far from thrilled when, in High School, one of my friends insisted I go on a thrill ride with him at the Dutchess County Fair. I don't like thrill rides. For the life of me, I can't figure out what the attraction is of buckling yourself into one of those things so you can feel your body tossed about like a sock in a dryer. Besides I thought we were going to see the cows and eat fried Twinkies!

Well, I relented. We got on one of these things where they sit you in a cage and buckle you in. The cage then goes around in a circle like a Ferris wheel, which wouldn't have been half bad if that's all it did. It did more though. The cage itself spun around like a top, making it difficult for your body, especially your stomach, to figure out which way it was rolling – side to side or forwards and backwards.

About half through, the ride stopped with a sudden jerk. This can't be good, I thought. It wasn't. Soon we heard someone yelling up to us that there's a bit of a problem but they'd have it fixed in a jiffy. How long is a jiffy? I wondered.

Okay...this was like my worst nightmare come true. Our cage was upside down and the only thing preventing our faces from planting themselves into the metal grid in front of us was the safety harness.

'If we live through this,' I told my friend. 'I'm going to kill him.'

I have no idea how long we hung there but it felt like hours. I could hardly stand up when they finally got us down. 'Never again.' I thought. 'Never again would I ignore my better instincts!'

Recently I watched a news clip about the opening of the longest foot bridge on earth. It precariously hangs in midair over an expanse so wide it boggles the mind. A foot bridge – you know one of those things with a narrow platform to walk on, ropes on either side to hang onto, and almost nothing to keep the darn thing from swinging wildly from side to side. That's it...no concrete anchors reaching up from the ground below to hold

it in place; no iron girders to secure it. Nothing! The only thing between you and certain death is that narrow platform below your feet. I felt queasy just thinking about it.

They interviewed a guy who had just walked the bridge. He was all smiles...puffing as he tried to catch his breath.

‘How was it?’ Asked the interviewer.

‘Thrilling!’ He declared. ‘Just magnificent!’

‘Was it scary?’

‘Oh, yeah, but that was half the fun!’

What’s the matter with this person? I wondered. This is one adventure that will never make it on my bucket list.

I suppose this is partially why I went into ministry. Oh sure, it has lots of challenges, I figured, but at least there aren’t any foot bridges, or canons to be shot from. At least there’s no precarious tangling in mid-air, I thought. (Clearly, I hadn’t yet been in the pulpit very much.) At least, there’s no need for a harness and steel cage on Sunday mornings. Wrong. Oh, so wrong. I clearly should have paid way more attention to today’s passage from Matthew!

The story begins immediately following the feeding of the 5,000, which we talked about last week. As Jesus tried to do before that miracle, Jesus is trying again to find some time to be alone, to pray, and to grieve the loss of his dear friend, John the Baptist.

So, Jesus dismisses the now satisfied crowd, sends the disciples off in their boat to go to the other side, and, finally, heads to the mountain for a time of prayer and rest. Finally!

Doesn’t take long, however, before the disciples again find themselves in trouble. Not far out from the shore, a mighty storm blows up battering their small boat. All seemed lost.

As they struggled to hold the sails intact and bailed water from the ship’s hull, one of them notices a human figure walking towards them on the surface of the water. The disciples are terrified. Can you imagine sitting out there in a storm like this - skies darkened, wind blowing, waves heaving, watery mist spraying, your tiny boat creaking and groaning from the strain of trying to hold itself together - and then you see a person

walking towards you on the surface of the water? Not good.

“It’s a ghost!” One of the terrified disciples screams.

“Take heart!” A voice calls out. “It’s me, Jesus, no need to be afraid.”

Easy for you to say Jesus. The disciples remain quiet in their terror. Finally, Peter is the only one brave enough to speak up.

“Jesus, if it’s you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Now, this is about where I once again have to scratch my head and wonder what in the world Peter was thinking. I mean, why in the world would someone risk stepping out of a perfectly good boat to do something as crazy as this. For all Peter knew, maybe this was a panic induced hallucination!

In response, Jesus gives Peter the go ahead.

Now, I want you to imagine this. There’s Peter on that tiny, wind battered boat. Tentatively, he swings one leg over the side, both hands clutching the boat’s wooden edge. Cautiously, he swings the other leg over, both feet now dangling over the wild waves. Can you feel the beat of his fast pumping heart? Can you feel his hands, arms, and legs trembling out of control?

With a deep breath, he pushes himself off with one white knuckled hand still clutching the side of the boat. Surprisingly, his feet don’t sink. Bravely, he then releases that one last hold he has on the boat. He lets go of all that is familiar, all that is certain, all that he has learned to count on, all that makes logical sense. He lets go, venturing forth to experience faith’s ability to keep him from sinking into oblivion. No safety nets, no harness, no ropes, none of the normal stuff one learns to rely on in this topsy turvy, crazy wild ride we call life. All of it, Peter leaves behind. All of it, Peter trades in for his trust in the one who has told him to ‘Come’.

For a scant moment, it works. His trust in Jesus sustains him. It holds him up but then he gets distracted. The fearsome waves reaching towards him, threatening to pull him under prove to be too much. He falters, his eyes lose focus, his heart panics, and the ways of the world again gain their grip on him. He begins to sink like a rock.

‘Save me, Jesus!’ He cries.

Jesus reaches out his hand, pulls Peter to safety, the two of them climb back into the boat, the storm quiets, and Jesus asks Peter, “Why did you doubt?”

Come on, Jesus, why did Peter doubt? The poor guy was scared. Any one of us would have done the same thing. This life we live is darn scary. It’s hard *not* to get distracted. Like the old saying goes, ‘if you’re not scared, then you’re not paying attention.’ Well, Jesus, we’re paying attention and, like Peter, we’re scared more often than not. The North Pole is melting at an alarming rate, destructive storms are popping up everywhere, floods are consuming towns in a flash, North Korea is shaking their missiles at us, illness and suffering is all around us. Yes, Jesus, we’re paying attention, and it scares the daylights out of us.

Perhaps, this is one of those times when it’s important to notice what Jesus didn’t say as much as what he said. Jesus *didn’t* say to Peter, “Why did you get out of that boat? What made you think you could walk on water?” Jesus didn’t say that. I said it because I, like the disciples cowering in the boat, would have never have taken such a risk!

No, what Jesus said is, ‘Why did you doubt you could walk on water?’

Why is faith so darn difficult and doubt so easy? Why is it so hard to believe that faith really can move mountains and maybe even make it possible to survive the tumultuous waves? Why is it so hard for us to release that white knuckled grip we tend to have on the familiar, daring, instead, to risk living by Jesus’ command to ‘come!’

To Peter’s credit, while the other disciples cowered in fear, Peter, at least, took a risk. He stepped out of the remnant security he clung to. He stepped out of all that made sense. He stepped out of the familiar to risk the foreign territory of embodied faith. He tentatively but bravely let go of the boat’s side and tried trusting Jesus even with his life.

Sometimes I tell people new to the ministry that being a Pastor is 10 percent what you learned in Seminary and 90 percent flying by the seat of your pants. There is so much that I have had to learn on the fly. There is so much decision making and risk taking that is necessary when it comes to keeping this wind tossed, wave bashed ship called the church afloat.

And there are so many times when you must learn how to loosen that white knuckled grip you have on the familiar, trusting that Jesus will do what you can't – namely, keep this ship, that often feels like it's falling apart, afloat.

To quote a sermon I once read, 'maybe the reason we seem to lack faith in our time is because we aren't doing anything that requires it.' Makes you think, doesn't it? Is our faith weak because we haven't done enough letting go when Jesus says 'come!' Try though we might, we still cling to that check book, to that familiar ground, to those old ways of thinking, to our political certitudes, to our weapons, to our threats, to our harsh, unforgiving ways, to our lack of belief in the power of grace.

It's not easy to follow this Jesus. Sometimes what he asks of us just doesn't make sense. Sometimes it requires us to do things that feel downright dangerous, even stupid. Sometimes the logic we have learned to lean on, convincing us that the boat is the safest place to be even when it's sinking, is the stuff we need to risk loosening our grip on. Sometimes Jesus says 'come' and sometimes we need to simply go, despite the wind and the waves.

Okay, so Peter failed, but, I wonder, did he really? Notice how the story ends. After Jesus got into the boat, all the disciples, even the ones too scared to do what Peter did, worshiped Jesus, declaring that he was truly the Son of God. No one said that after Jesus fed over 5,000 people, including the disciples, but here they do. So, you see, not only did Peter's risk change Peter but it transformed the other disciples too. Not only can a faith that risks transform us but it can transform the community around us in ways we never imagined possible.

Well, so much for my idea of choosing a safe vocation. Maybe I shouldn't have been so hard on my friend who talked me into that ride at the Dutchess County fair. Maybe it was good training. Maybe it was good preparation for the One who has this way of meeting us in the storm and inviting us to risk faith even against our better judgement. Maybe faith is one of those things that can only grow strong when we dare to use it, even and especially in the storm.

To God alone be all the glory. Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious God, we confess to you the fear that often consumes us. The wind blows, the waves devour, the stormy mist distorts our vision and we grow scared. Life, at best, feels precarious and dangerous. We, in turn, cling to whatever small certitudes we can find, whether it be opinions we are loathe to capitulate on or shaky practices that hinder our ability to discover who we really are.

Above the din of the storm, help us, we ask, to hear your voice bidding us to come. Grant us the fortitude and humility we need to swing our feet from the fragile surfaces we stand upon to the strong, though seemingly foolish, surface of a faith that is bravely lived. Help us to focus our eyes upon you, O Christ, in these tenuous times so that we might show the communities around us just how reliable faith can be when we dare to test the waters with holy resolve.

We pray this, O God, as we consider the many dangers your creation seems to currently be entangled in. In the face of wars and rumors of war, in the face of threats and counter threats, in the face of withdrawal and selfish protectionism, in the face of lives forgotten and lives demeaned, in the face of callous disregard of neighbor, in the face of believing that hating our enemy is the only way, help us to hear your voice saying, 'Come'. Grant us courage to leave the old behind so that the new might truly heal.

Grant peace, we ask, O God, to those in the midst of the storm- the lonely, the ill, the suffering, the frail, the sorrowful, the frightened, the weak, the discouraged, the addicted, and the defeated. Hear also these prayers we now name in our silence or aloud....

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*