

Burton Cooper
Matt 14:22-33

Gen 37; Rom 10:5-15;

Preached at online service for Church of the Good Shepherd,
August 9, 2020

The Man of Little Faith

Peter said, "Lord, command me to come to you on the water."
Jesus said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat,
Started walking on the water ... but becoming frightened,
And beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"
Jesus reached out his hand, caught Peter, and said to him,
"You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

"You of little faith," says Jesus to Peter. A biting remark. Poor Peter, poor impulsive Peter, always striving to be an exemplar of faith, and failing in that endeavor time after time, earning rebukes from Jesus, whom he loves. For this is not the only gospel story of Peter's failure. There is the story of Jesus likening Peter to Satan --- imagine that, the loyal Peter having to listen to himself being likened to Satan --- and only because Peter has counseled Jesus to avoid being crucified; and then there's the story, set just before Jesus' arrest, of Jesus telling Peter that he shall, that very day, deny Jesus three times, and Peter saying, "Never, Lord," only to do so before the sun has set.

I know we tend to think of this morning's walking on water story as a miracle story, with the focus on Jesus; and the miracle serving to validate Jesus as, to quote Matthew, "Truly, the Son of God." But, at least for this sermon, let's focus on Peter, noting that Peter wants something from Jesus; and Jesus wants something from Peter. Peter wants Jesus to enable him to walk on water. He thinks that if Jesus commands him to do so, he will be able to do it. Jesus, for his part, wants Peter to have faith. When Peter starts sinking, Jesus, disappointed, takes that as a failure of faith. Person of little faith, he says to Peter. With what tone does Jesus say that?. Scornfully? Sadly? Sarcastically? We don't know. And here's something else we don't know, a real puzzle for us. Why doesn't Jesus take Peter's cry, "Lord, save me," save me from drowning, why does that cry, "save me," not count in Jesus' eyes as a sign of faith, for does not that cry indicate Peter's faith that Jesus has the power to protect him from

drowning, to protect him from death itself. And yet, Jesus calls Peter a person of little faith. It's a puzzle, not only a puzzle but a delicate matter for our faith, for scripture is full of passages imploring God for protection from harm, and in the most basic story in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Exodus story, God does exactly that: God protects the Hebrews from the pursuing Egyptian army, drowning its warriors and chariots in the raging sea. Even more, in our prayers, do we not regularly ask God for healing for our loved ones, and for ourselves for that matter. Do we not thank God, do we not feel grateful to God, for keeping us from harm? And when we do so, do we not do so out of our faith. Are we not right in thinking it would be faithless not to so pray. Do we not know, in faith, that God's loving power, God's omnipotent love, can heal us from some destructive forces, just as we also know, tragically know, that God's loving power, does not, cannot, heal us, protect us, from all destructive forces --- for love, even omnipotent love, does not coerce. So terrible things happen to good people, and terrible things can happen to people of faith. We all know that. These past months we have all been living through a world-wide pandemic; thousands of people, good, not so good, dying every day, millions hospitalized, suffering, the elderly, the poor, the discriminated against, but also the well-off, the young, even a child now and then. I can never think of a child suffering, dying, without Dostoevski's great novel, the Brothers Karamazov, rushing into my head, the scene where Ivan, one of the brothers, loses his faith, loses his desire to live, because his soul is undermined by the knowledge that the only existence we humans can ever have is one where evil, horrible suffering, can be inflicted upon a child. Alyosha, the other brother, sees the same evil in the world as Ivan, but his soul, instead of being undermined by the evil, is filled with compassion towards those who suffer, so that he responds by living a life going out in goodness towards others. And thinking about Alyosha and his response to evil, gives us the clue to this morning's puzzle regarding Jesus' harsh rebuke to Peter: Jesus calling Peter a man "of little faith." Though we have to remember that to have a little faith is still to have faith. Peter would not have cried, "Lord, save me," without the faith that Christ loved him and could save him from drowning. Surely Jesus knows that. So perhaps we are to take Jesus' rebuke as a cautionary note, not so much denying Peter's faith as pointing us elsewhere to where the heart of our faith lies, pointing us, if you will, to Alyosha. Certainly we know, as Peter knows, that God has compassion for us, has mercy upon us, suffers with our suffering, but as Alyosha reminds

us, as if we need such reminding, the heart of our faith lies in our going out compassionately to others. For we know Jesus summarizes our faith with the words, “Love God and love your neighbor as yourself,” and we know that Paul tells us, over and over, that we must love others, that without such love we “gain nothing.” Of course we know all that, as the older Peter, the one that appears in the Book of Acts, has come to know it --- and has come to live it.

“Has come to live it.” Ah, there’s the catch. What a gap between knowing and living. There’s something in us, something rational in us, even moral, that resists the full living of love for others. And that is our impulse towards self interest, the great power of self-interest in the human spirit. We cannot be without self-interest; we would not have evolved as a successful species without it. We can see it all around us. We can hear it in Peter’s cry, “Lord, save me!” What is more natural than that cry. What is more natural than concern for our welfare and the welfare of those we love, and those who will protect us from harm; what is more natural than the way we prioritize those for whom we have such immediate concerns: our children, our parents, our people. And what is more natural, more rational, than the way we resist those others who threaten the welfare of those whom we love, resist them unto death, if necessary. The Bible, our book of faith and redemption, knows all this about us, knows how our self interest can lead us to undo the good of others, to seek to dominate them. We can see that in the stories that go from Cain and Abel to the Jacob stories we’ve been hearing lately, and to this morning’s Joseph story, where even brothers betray brothers. What a great mix of good and evil in those stories, stories of love and hate, of faith and deceit, compassion and murder, reflecting, only too well, what goes on in human history.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, our faith is life-saving, it is life saving because it is rooted in God who cannot be conquered by evil and is love itself, so that we know, in faith we know, that there will always be in reality not only worldly powers but a power transcendent to the world drawing us to goodness, to the love of others, to concern for the welfare of others, all others, not just those close to us. And never have we needed that faith, that hope, more than we do today, today, when changes in the climate are threatening life on earth; when the rational, self-interested way we are living is heating up our climate, melting our Arctic glaciers, poisoning our air, so that it is no longer rational to live the way we are living, no longer in our self-interest. What is called for now is a widening of our concern to include

all human lives, more than that, all creaturely life, all life on this planet, so that this widening of our concern will move us to significantly alter our way of living. What shall we call this widening of concern for the welfare of others, of all? Shall we not call it love. Isn't that what Jesus teaches us love is in the parable of the Good Samaritan: concern for the welfare of the other, any other in need. We have tended to think of such love as an option, that history could go along without it. Absurd as it sounds, climate change has made love, concern for all life, a necessity. We have approached the time of the absurd necessity of love, the need to care for, and live for, all life, everywhere. Will we respond to that necessity? In faith we can say that necessity is the very meaning of life. For God is love, and we are created in God's image, created to love, drawn to love. And so we have good ground to hope that we will alter our lives, for we know we are not alone in that endeavor; God is there for us, drawing us towards living a life for all, preserving life for all, loving all being, and God will not stop being there for us.

Praise be to God for this great mercy.

Praise Christ.

Amen.