

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 14-A (9 August 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2020-08-08 Sat 15:34>

Collect

Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28, Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b, Romans 10:5-15, Matthew 14:22-33

1 Beginning: Once upon a time...

It was a dark and stormy night. Jesus' disciples had been working all day serving the needy crowd and then sailing all night against an adverse wind and choppy waters. The disciples were tired, beat up. It's no wonder that when they saw a figure on the water, not sinking but walking over top the water, they didn't believe their tired eyes. They were terrified. They thought it was a ghost!

Then Jesus spoke and said, "Take heart, it's me. Do not fear!" It wasn't a ghost after all, but their friend and teacher, Jesus. But walking on top of the lake? I'm still not seeing a lot of reason not to fear. Something strange is happening! It was a difficult, unbelievable conclusion to a difficult, exhausting day.

2 Middle: Tension: destabilizing

Peter responds to the appearance of Jesus by asking Jesus to command him to come out onto the water with him. What a fascinating request! Is that what you would have said at that particular moment? But Peter sees Jesus doing something completely unexpected and he realizes that, if Jesus were to command him to do the same, Jesus could enable him to obey. So Jesus does and Peter does, and there stands Peter, walking on the water like Jesus. How insane is that?

Now we could ask all kinds of questions, draw all kinds of conclusions from this story. But I want to concentrate on a particular point. I want to concentrate on what this story tells us about the process of sanctification or, better, *theosis* – being transformed into the image of God. What this story tells us about the Christian project of coming to resemble God in our hearts and minds, in our attitudes and behaviors, in our compassion, our prayer, and our actions.

Peter is a disciple of Jesus. That means he is intentionally engaged in the process of being formed, changed, transformed by Jesus. He is becoming like Jesus in important ways that will enable him to participate in the work that God is doing through Jesus. So when Peter sees Jesus walking on the water, and Peter knows he is supposed to be a disciple, an imitator of Jesus, he understands that he should strive to do what Jesus does. But what Jesus is doing is impossible! So Peter prays, “Jesus, command me to come to you!” And sure enough, Jesus responds, “Come!” So Peter does the impossible.

This is the life of faith. The demands are extreme. Feed 13,000 people with a lunch met for 13. Love your enemy and pray for the one who persecutes you. Place God above every other priority and passion in your life. These are not easy things. In fact, they are impossible things. But Jesus says, “Come!” So frequently, a disciple of Jesus will find himself doing the impossible.

But then, something goes wrong. Peter comes to his senses and realizes what is going on. Peter gets stuck on his own inadequacy, the impossibility of the situation, and the threatening posture of the sea. These other things all rise in his head and take the place of Jesus as the center of his worldview. And that’s when Peter starts to sink. He thought he was obeying Jesus’ command, but he’s no longer so sure. So he cries out, “Jesus, save me!” And the process of faith continues on. Except now his clothes are all wet.

3 End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...

I have to confess: getting out of the boat is super-hard. It is difficult even when I believe I hear a clear calling from God. The easy thing for me to do is to keep paddling around in the shallows, where I can maintain an illusion of control. I want to stick to the things I’m good at, the ways I can show clear results and feel confident about my accomplishments.

But that’s not where we grow. That’s not where we’re changed. That’s not where God does God’s transforming work in us. God calls us to get out of the boat, and not just where it’s safe, in the shallows. God calls us into the deep.

What are the deep places in your life? Are you spending any time there?

Aviva and I just completed the Diocese of New Jersey’s online Anti-Racism Training. This was actually my second time through their program, and both times I was surprised and dismayed at the resistance I found in my own heart when encountering some of the challenging material. I was secretly relieved to see that resistance expressed out loud by other participants in the program. Because none of us likes facing the deep places in our lives. I resist the possibility that I might be incomplete, uninformed, or sometimes just wrong. I hate the idea that I have benefited, however unwillingly, from systems that make life *easier* for me and *harder* for others. My heart actively pushes back against the idea that I might have things to learn or ways to grow or responsibilities to change the world in ways that don’t benefit me directly. Because I want to think of myself as basically a good person. I want to think of the world as a fair and just place where my success is purely the result of my own merit and hard work.

But it is exactly those times when I find my heart pushing back that I recognize that I, like Peter, have encountered some deep water. I have found one of those places where I am out of my depth, unable to cope on my own, and forced to cry out for Jesus’ help. That push-back in my heart is a gift, an invitation.

It is Jesus saying, "Todd! Come out of the boat!" Jesus is inviting me to grow, to learn to walk on the water by keeping my eyes on him. Jesus is giving me opportunity to increase my faith by trusting that he's going to catch me when I inevitably fall.

What are the scary, deep places in your life? Because those are the places where you are going to meet Jesus.

The road to sanctification, the process of becoming a disciple of Jesus, the journey toward allowing God's spirit to shine clearly through your life, is a long and windy one. Jesus is inviting you today, "Come!" Leave behind your fears and your limitations. Discover God's invitation, God's purposes in your life. In worship, in prayer, in quiet and in community, in service and in receiving, listen for the voice of God and observe what God is already up to in the world around you. Jesus invites you out of the boat, to where he is. If you're willing to answer Jesus' call and encounter the deep places in your own life, if you're willing to get wet in the process of growing, you too can learn to walk on the water.

Amen.