

Stepping out with Peter

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Text: Matt. 14.22-33

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Suppose I was to have you stand up against the wall with an apple on your head. Would you allow me to use that apple as a target for my archery practice? I think that I could safely assume that you wouldn't. But what if I were to produce several witnesses who could vouch for the fact that every time I have done this in the past I succeeded? What if I could show you Olympic gold medals that I won in archery? Could you be swayed if I demonstrated my ability using someone else right before your eyes? No, I don't think any evidence could be provided that would assure you to the point where you would trust me with your life in such a way. The fear of being shot by a stray arrow would overshadow any trust you might have in me as a marksman and keep you from taking the risk.

The dynamic I am illustrating is the tension between trust and fear – a dynamic that is very much a part of our everyday lives. It is also very much a part of the story that we read in Matthew's gospel today. Jesus, wanting to pray alone, sent his disciples off before him to cross the Sea of Galilee in a boat. But a storm overtook them and they were forced to spend the night on the water, pulling on their oars in an effort to move the boat on against the wind. They were still there in the early hours before dawn when Jesus joined them by walking out over the water. Now the disciples reacted to this with fear. A natural response, I think, to seeing such an unreal occurrence. Jesus realized their fear as they watched him approach, and called to them to comfort them, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid".

At this point the impetuous Peter issued a peculiar challenge which contains two implications: (vs 28) "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to you on the water". In this request we see a declaration of devotion ("I will come to you") but also a declaration of trust (I know you can make me walk on the water). Jesus, in response, doesn't say anything about Peter's challenge. He simply responded "Come!". Jesus took that challenge and turned it around. It was now up to Peter to put his money where his mouth was and prove that declaration of trust by getting out of the boat.

I wonder how he might have felt before taking that first step. Did he just go for it, blindly trusting in Jesus totally, or did he waver for a moment. We don't know, but we must realize all that Peter had seen and experienced as he had followed Jesus to that point. Using the chronology given by Matthew, Jesus had already "healed every disease and sickness among the people" (4.23), including lepers, the blind, the paralysed. He drove demons out of people. He calmed a storm. He had taught of the Kingdom of God, faced pharisees and stood his ground. He raised a young girl from death. He even cured Peter's

own mother of a fever. Just before this incident at sea, he fed 5000 people. Now, there was Jesus standing on the water before him. All this stood as a testimony to Jesus, and assured Peter that with Jesus' help Peter could indeed walk on the water. Jesus could provide the means, but that wasn't enough. Peter had to provide the trust that Jesus could do it in order for it to happen. And he must have trusted, for it says, (vs 29) "And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus."

Unfortunately it did not last very long. Peter's resolve to trust Christ and walk on the water was shaken when he saw the wind. The impossibility of what he was doing began to dissolve the miraculous nature of the moment. He became afraid. (vs 31) "And immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?". We know that it was because he could not disregard the reality of the storm around him, or the fear that he just might not make it. What he knew of the "real world" made him question what Jesus could do. Jesus didn't fail to make Peter stay on the surface. But that lack of trust did not stop the concern Jesus had for him, for Jesus reached out and saved Peter even though his faith could not stand the test. Christ's concern for Peter persevered even though Peter's faith did not.

Trust and fear. We know of the tension between the two in our day to day lives ☹ whether it is walking down your street at night, climbing a tall ladder, the things you will or won't tell a friend in confidence, or your surgeon for an operation. There's the story of people boarding a passenger aircraft. Everything seemed normal as they got comfortable in their seats. The pre-take-off announcement then began. "Good morning. Welcome to flight 767 to Vancouver. We will be travelling at 35,000 feet during our one hour trip. This is the inaugural flight of our new, fully automated plane. There are no pilots on board. Be assured that everything has been engineered for your safety and comfort. So relax and enjoy your trip, because nothing can go wrong... go wrong... go wrong... go wrong...." Would you still be sitting on that plane? In life we will only trust something or someone so far.

These kinds of dynamics are at work within our response to faith as well. The message of the gospel presents a multitude of challenges to us and our faith. These challenges often seem to be expressed in such absolute terms, requiring our total and complete response: help the needy, forgive others, love your enemies, go for another the second mile, spread the Good News of the gospel to the world. Some of these challenges may seem easy and we meet them every day. On the other hand, some seem so difficult that we can never see ourselves rising to them.

But in between are the borderline cases. These are things that we would like to do, even could do, but we hesitate in acting upon them. Usually these cases require only a little more than we already give, but it is that extra bit that causes us to think twice about them. The particular dilemma varies from person to person, day to day. For example, maybe talk at work occasionally rolls around to religion but we

hesitate to speak of our beliefs out of fear of ridicule. Besides, we wonder if anything would change if we did? We see the desperate need of those suffering in our world, but find it hard to give since we have needs too. Jesus said we shouldn't worry about our material wellbeing as God would care for us, and yet we wonder: will God really? There are always times when we find ourselves standing in the boat wondering if we should step out onto the water. Often we stop because of fear.....and often because of a lack of trust that Jesus will really come through for us. It is comfortable in the boat, and safer not to put ourselves at risk by testing the waters. But if we do that we will find ourselves remaining ever stationary, looking across to Christ calling to us to come. No matter who we are or how much we have grown in our faith, there will always times and occasions when we are not anxious to step out in response to Him.

Many churches in Canada are caught in this quandary. We all see how much our society has changed...how quickly our society has changed. Many congregations have been left bewildered by it all. After all, things used to go fine back in the days of the old Christendom culture, when the majority of Canadians counted themselves Christian. Today's society requires us to formulate a new stance relative to society...to build a relationship with the people of our society now that the old partnership of church with society has disappeared. Today we need to introduce people—teach people—about what the church is, what we stand for, what we believe. And the best way for that to happen is to make ourselves more visible, by going out and caring for neighbour, letting them know that we do so because Jesus said this is how God intended the world to be. This is the core principle of the missional church. But evolving in that direction means a shift in priorities...means increasing focus on the needs of the neighbourhood, increasing our engagement with those in the neighbourhood...doing more in and around the neighbourhood. These ideas can make a congregation nervous. From a zero-sum perspective, if more attention is given to what is beyond the congregation, we can fear that means there will be less attention given to things inside the congregation. That in turn can prompt a congregation to remain inside the boat...seeing societal change as the storm that threatens those within.

Peter did not walk on water by his own ability. No one can do that! Peter was willing to take the risk of stepping out...stepping out to do a new thing...to do what seemed an impossible thing, because he trusted Jesus to help him. Peter understood Jesus to be a point of security. He knew, in that first step, that it would be fine. My two sons are avid rock climbers. I am regularly astonished by the rock faces they tackle. They are careful climbers, but also confident. Confident not just in their ability, but also confident in their belayer: the person who is holding their safety rope. They trust the belayer to catch them if they...when they fall. Knowing they are in good hands boosts their confidence, allowing them to be a little bit more daring. That's what Jesus does for us: trusting him to be there to catch us as individuals...as a congregation...so we can be a bit more adventurous in faith. Because God desires to see every congregation get a bit more adventurous. And because God desires that God will help us in that. The message of this story is: trust me, and try putting your foot on the water!

This is grace, isn't it? But we see even more grace in Peter's failure to continue trusting Jesus. When he was spooked by the reality of the challenge and started to sink, did Jesus abandon him to his fate because of a lack of faith? No. Jesus reached out and helped him. This too builds trust. If we try something new in mission...in faith... and it doesn't work, we'll be OK. God's still with us.

So what's the message here? Each of us as individuals have our own, unique growing edge in faith. Every congregation has its own next new thing it can aspire to in responding to Jesus' invitation to come. Trust that he will help you as you take that first step in his direction. Trust that he will catch you if you start to fall. You may be surprised that in your own way you too can walk on water.