

Matthew 16, stay in boat 2017

We have a story of fishermen this morning. I enjoy recreational fishing, but my husband *loves* to fish; probably many of you do, too. He especially likes to fish on Lake Superior, which I have concluded is one of the most weather-dependent past times *ever*. Not only do you want to avoid extreme cold or rain, but even the wind has to be just right, particularly with his size of boat. Many a time he has driven to the boat launch, only to determine it's too foggy, too windy, the wind is from a bad direction, or a rain storm is blowing in,. And of course, you can't mess with Lake Superior; if the conditions aren't good, you certainly don't want to go out, especially if it's just for fun. As we well know, people die on this Lake. The first funeral recorded in our registry, in 1927, was the drowning of a fishermen. Just this last week, a father and daughter tragically drowned when they were swimming off of Park Point in stormy waves on Thursday. The Lake is dangerous! Some of us have been out in stormy waters. Others of us have seen the crashing waves from the shore during a nor-easter. It is not hard for us to imagine the terror, the exhaustion, and the sense of being up against unbeatable odds that people in such situations must feel. The disciples in our Gospel lesson, out in a storm on the sea of Galilee, felt this way. And of course, ideally, they shouldn't have been out in their boat; the conditions were stormy, and they should have known better and called it off, like my husband does. But, they were out in the stormy seas for a reason: Jesus had made them go out, our text tells us. And that word for "made" implies a forceful compelling. Jesus *compels* his disciples out into stormy waters? What is that all about?

Happily, we get to think about geography for a moment! Sabbatical hasn't worn off quite yet! Recall again that ancient Israel, called Palestine in the time of Jesus, is the

size of the state of New Jersey. In other words, teensy. The bulk of the action tended to center around southern Palestine, where Jerusalem, the capital city, along with Temple, were located. Here, the learned scholars, the scribes and the Pharisees, the most devout and respected citizens lived, worked, and gathered. Bethlehem is nearby; the place of Christ's birth. Bethany, where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived, is also nearby, where Christ often visited. Jesus will die and be raised in Jerusalem. But, the vast bulk of his ministry was *not* in this southern stronghold of Judaism, but was instead in northern Palestine, in the area of Galilee. This area was on a trade route, which meant it was more dilute, less purely Jewish. And the folks in this area were considered by those in the south to be inferior Jews, lesser Jews, not-quite-right Jews. A number of these northern inhabitants made their living off the Sea of Galilee, and it is from here that Jesus finds his 12 disciples and does the bulk of his ministry. And this is odd! It's as though the Pope came to visit our state, and instead of hanging out at St. Paul's Cathedral in the Twin Cities, decided to set up camp at Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Two Harbors. It's a geographical choice on God's part that makes the point that God is not going to do things like we think they should be done, but rather, God surprises us. God always seems to favor the unlikely and the unexpected!

So, the Messiah, the Christ, is up north in Galilee, of all places, and many, though not all, of his disciples are professional anglers. Not unlike the past of our own seaside community. Here is how they and we are *similar*: they fished with nets on an inland, freshwater sea. As happens here. The Sea of Galilee, also called Lake Tiberias, *was* fresh water, like our Lake Superior. Here is how they and we are *different*. But, *our* sea has a square mile surface area of approximately 31,000 square miles. Theirs had a square mile

surface area of approximately 64 square miles. 31,000 square miles vs. 64 square miles--  
-see the difference? Not really in the same league at all, size wise, are they?

Nevertheless, the Sea of Galilee is long, and when the wind swept down the length of the waters, as nor easters do here, the result was a similar life threatening chaos of wind and waves. As happens in our text this morning.

Right before our miraculous text this morning, Jesus has performed another miracle on this same day, the feeding of the 5000 with a few fish and loaves of bread. It was a massive crowd, a big miracle, and a long day. Our text picks up just as the people are finishing up eating, before they have left, actually. We read, “Immediately Jesus made—compelled- the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, while he dismissed the crowds.” So, while the bread eaters are still brushing the crumbs off their robes, the disciples are being insistently told to cross the sea ahead of Jesus. We might wonder why? Why doesn't Jesus have them help him dismiss the crowds and then they could all cross together in the boat, if cross they must?

Basically, it seems that Jesus was looking for some downtime by himself here. Prior to feeding the 5000, he had been on his way with his disciples to a remote area to spend time by himself, we are told explicitly in the preceding verses. Why did he especially long for this? He has just received word of the beheading of his kinsman, John the Baptizer, by King Herod. He wants to grieve, and pray, and spend some time away from the endless needs of those around him. He and his disciples get together in the boat at that point, and cross to an area for private time. But, those hungry crowds follow him around the Sea, and are waiting for him on the other side. The text states that when he

saw them, as he disembarked from the boat, he had compassion on them. And instead of getting that time he needed, he did teaching, healing, and multiplied loaves and fishes.

But that need remains, so much so, that he now intends to send his disciples one way, by boat; the crowds the other way, by land; and go by himself up the mountain to pray. He needs this time, and he creates it. So, if Jesus needs some down time and solitary time to pray, rest, and recharge, maybe we shouldn't feel bad or guilty about needing such time either---do we think we're tougher than God? But, while Jesus is praying and evening falls, the situation is deteriorating for his friends in their boat on the sea. In fact, they are in perilous waters, waves crashing, the wind against them, and far from land. We gain perhaps some new perspective on this familiar story by digging a little into the original Greek of this text. When we read in our text that by the evening the boat was *battered* by waves, the word for battered, "basanizo", literally means torture, torment or harassment; there is a great intensity to this storm; it's like being tortured or tormented. And when we read that the wind was *against* them, the adjective for the wind, "enantios", suggests opposition or hostility. So, while storms are a force of nature with an impersonal quality, there was nevertheless a sense of hostility, of opposition, in the nature of these wind and waves as the disciples struggled against them.

I am thinking that whether or not we sail the Great Lakes on any type of vessel, we know what it means to face storms. We know what it means to feel that circumstance after circumstance goes against us; to feel that the world is truly a hostile place, where we are opposed on every level and beset by problems, troubles, and trials. And so often, these kinds of troubles come at us all at once, so that we seem to be surrounded by wind and waves and feel completely overwhelmed.

I once heard our now former Bishop, Pastor Peter Strommen, preach a sermon in which he spoke about “the forces of opposition” that we experience in our daily lives. I thought he was right on. Because while things like illness, accidents, and misfortune are in many ways random, without intent, and are simply the luck or bad luck of the draw; it often feels to us like we are facing forces of opposition. That the wind and the waves are hostile to us. That the circumstances of life are ganging up on us in such a way as to truly be our enemies and to bring us down. Very often, when we struggle, it doesn’t feel like an impersonal, neutral situation. It feels like we’re up against forces of opposition, against hostile circumstances and powerful foes. Whether or not that is literally the case—it is certainly how we often experience it. We can understand what the disciples in that small boat on the storm tossed sea must feel: terror, exhaustion, and the sense of facing unconquerable odds. They feared for their lives and rightly so. It might seem that things could hardly get any worse, but they do. Their fear turns to utter terror when a ghostly figure draws closer to them, walking on the water. In their fear and exhaustion, they didn’t at first recognize their Lord. Knowing their fear, Christ speaks and says, “Take heart; it is I. Have no fear.”

Here is where things get quite interesting, of course, because Peter decides to get out of the boat. We know this story very well, but stick with me---we’re about to think outside the box here. Typically, we approach this text by seeing Peter as stepping out in faith, but sinking once he takes his eyes off Jesus. It seems an admirable attempt on his part. That works. *On the other hand*, at our raucous discussion at text study last week, we considered this text from a new angle, asking this question—*should* Peter have gotten out of the boat? Did he have any business doing so? What is he trying to prove?

Think this through with me. And keep in mind that the boat was the earliest symbol for the Christian church. And the seas represented chaos. The early church was indeed a small boat out in stormy seas. Remnants of this theology remain in church architecture, where the main part of the sanctuary is called the nave, like the underside of a boat, and often having similar beams to that boat's nave up above on the ceiling.

Returning to our story, things are very difficult for the disciples on those stormy seas of chaos, yes---but they were directed there by their Lord, they were still afloat, and they were all together in the same boat. Much like the early Christian church, facing waves of persecution. And much perhaps like our own times---not that we are so much facing *that* kind of persecution, but the church *is* struggling in stormy seas, certainly, within our culture. Jesus was walking towards the boat, *he* was coming to *them*! *Why* did Peter feel the need to hop out and meet him on the way? Is this really a good time to jump ship? And what does he say? “Lord, *if* it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” It's almost a bit of a dare, isn't it? Like “Lord, if you're really with me, I'm going to jump off this roof and expect to fly”. Is that how God works? We might also wonder, what are the rest of the 11 thinking, who stay in the boat? Maybe something like—

“ Right, there goes Peter again; always has to prove he's number one, the most holy, the best disciple, heads and shoulders above the rest of us, now he's going to walk on water like Jesus.” We don't get detail about things like this, but when Jesus replies, “Come”, is he not so much thinking “you go, Peter,” as he is thinking—“ok, Peter, check it out; leave the rest in the boat and go solo, try and walk on water like me and see what happens”? We don't actually know, do we? And notice that when Peter sinks and Jesus catches him, he doesn't pull him up and say, “Keep on walking by yourself to that far

shore, Peter, show us what you can do”. But rather, he pulls him into the safety of the boat! Peter is right back where he started—and Jesus put him there! So, it’s at least plausible that another way to look at this text is to see the value of *staying in the boat* amidst the stormy seas—as in, don’t leave the church and think to go solo in some spectacular way just as the waves are the most perilous.....maybe this is the exact time to stay together in the boat, trusting that it is afloat and that Christ comes to us where we already are? I mean, how many times do we see individuals or groups break away from the church because the church isn’t as holy as these folks are going to be? They have it right, everyone else has it wrong? Isn’t that a kind of trying to walk on water on their own power? The boat of the church is far from perfect, but it has endured and been blessed to be a blessing for thousands of years. There may be some wisdom in staying together, in the boat, as Jesus comes to us there. It’s at least worth considering that God is God, and we are not, and that perhaps walking on water should be left to Christ? Maybe we need to keep manning the boat! While the church is certainly struggling in our place and time, it is still God’s vehicle for blessing the world, and we are a part of that. In fact, our particular boat in Knife River, MN is most definitely afloat and is a means that God uses to bring light and life to our community and world. By staying together in the boat, we are a part of what God is already up to in this time and place.

I mentioned during the announcements the violence in Charlottesville, VA this weekend, resulting from a rally of white supremacists. The ideology of white supremacy is evil and completely incompatible with the Gospel; certainly such racism is a hostile “force of opposition” we face in this world. But the most powerful image I saw during this weekend was a band of clergy, across all denominations, linking arms and silently

walking the streets of Charlottesville in prayer, in opposition to white supremacy. They didn't do it alone, going solo, but *together*—facing off that evil as those who know they are in the same boat, piloted by the same Lord. There is power in standing together, led by Christ.

So, sometimes the seas are stormy...nationally or personally. And sometimes we are, of course, afraid. There's a Scottish sailors prayer that speaks to this desire for the divine presence when surrounded by stormy seas: "Round our skiff be God's about-ness, ere she try the depths of sea. Seashell frail for all her stoutness, unless Thou her Helmsman be."

I think it's that God's about-ness, that presence of Christ, that we too long for and need and find in our own stormy seas. When we're overwhelmed and beset by the forces of opposition, we want Christ to be the Helmsman of our skiff. The good news of this text is two-fold then: even in stormy seas, the boat is afloat and Christ comes to us over even the most chaotic of seas. And if we should find ourselves sinking, we hear his words: "Take heart! It is I; do not be afraid." Amen.