

STEPPING OUT FOR JESUS

Matthew 14:22-32 & John 15:9-11

Matthew 14:22-32 Jesus Walks on the Water

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" and they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid."

²⁸ And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹ He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. ³⁰ But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

John 15:9-12 (found within the text of the message)

MESSAGE:

Peter stepped out of the boat onto a stormy lake with nothing but the clothes on his back—and faith. He trusted that Jesus would not let him sink. This is one of the most powerful examples of faith we have in the Bible—second only, perhaps, to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son at God's command. To step out of whatever boat you have built to carry you through life's storms and place all your trust in Jesus Christ to keep you afloat and see you through, takes great faith. Most of us don't have it. If Peter was "of little faith," because he doubted that Jesus would keep him afloat in the midst of a storm, then what are we, who spend our lives trying to AVOID storms at all costs? The fact is, we don't so much want a God who will BAIL us out of trouble as we do one who will KEEP us out of trouble. We want a God we don't HAVE to depend on rather than a God we CAN depend on—a financial planner rather than a Savior.

So it is when one has great wealth. Jesus said, "*How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*" Jesus is not saying that rich men are bad or that riches themselves are evil. He is merely saying that, when a person is able to satisfy all his material needs, he is less likely to discern his spiritual needs. By any reasonable definition of the term, we are rich. We live in a country that showers us with more prosperity than any other in history, a society where the absence of health insurance is considered to be a sign of poverty. And since we have so much, we don't have to trust anyone for anything. If we lose our job, there's always another job.

Meanwhile, there's unemployment compensation. When that runs out, there's welfare assistance. If all that runs out, we can declare bankruptcy and start over again. We have safety net after safety net to keep us from falling into the arms of Jesus out of sheer material need. Who needs faith? Who do we need to do what?

When needs are slight, faith is inert. And when faith is inert, we have no idea of what it can accomplish. The Bible tells us plainly what faith can do. A mustard seed's worth will move a mountain. If we ask for ANYTHING in Jesus name, believing that it will be done, He will do it. Ask, seek, knock and you will receive, find and enter. That is the radical promise of God to all believers. So why don't we ask and seek and knock?

First of all, when people have relatively comfortable lives, they don't tend to see need until it clobbers them. How many people have I known who considered prayer a duty and a burden until they found themselves devastated by unforeseen circumstances, and suddenly had a need they couldn't meet? Then their prayer life got kicked into high gear in a hurry. It seems like we never learn anything except by getting our noses bloodied. As long as we can take refuge in our own resources—the plans and methods and techniques that have served us in the past—that's where we prefer to go for help. We'd rather trust our own cleverness than trust in the Lord. And this is the essence of sin: trust in ourselves rather than trust in God. Luther said that sin led man to curve in on himself rather than reach out to God, and so people who trust in themselves more than God simply end up imploding. Have you ever seen pictures of a large building being imploded? They place explosive charges at vital points within the structure of the building and when they are set off the building just collapses in on itself in a huge cloud of smoke and dust. That's what our fate is if we don't reach out to God and let him into our lives. Our lives are full of sound and fury that signify nothing, go nowhere, and end up collapsing inward. Dust returns to dust.

So it's vital that we reach out to God. But how exactly do we do that? This brings us to the new commandment Jesus gave to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane which happens to be our Gospel lesson for today—and a wonderful one to consider as we begin a new year:

[John 15:9-12] *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."*

At other times, Jesus put this same command in the form of a summary of the second table of the Law—the last seven commandments: *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* Not, as Jesus said, with word and tongue, but with truth and action. It's fine to feel affection and sympathy for someone in need, but it's a lot better to DO something for them. If God had merely felt affection and sympathy for us after we plunged ourselves and the rest of creation into the darkness of sin, but had done nothing about it—we would still be in a sorry mess. But God DID do something about it—something that caused him unimaginable pain. Something that was in the most transcendent possible meaning of the term, *self-sacrificing*. And Jesus has extended that opportunity to you and to me to do the same: to love others as He has loved us. God has planted the

desire to do this in every believer—the impulse to show this kind of divine love to others. The problem is that there are so many things that we allow to get in the way!

Ultimately, of course, it's a matter of priorities, and let's face it: practicing charitable love has a way of falling to the bottom of our schedule of daily activities. We're far more inclined to "curve in on ourselves": contemplating our own needs is more attractive than trying to discover the needs of others because if we contemplate the needs of others, it will almost certainly lead us to want to do something about them. You might say we'd just rather not think about it. Or, like Scarlett O'Hara, we'll think about it tomorrow. And so we meander along in our self-serving agendas.

Great faith comes from great need. If you can't find great need within yourself, you can easily find it in other people. If you will take the time to focus on the needs of others—the lonely widow, the bewildered resident of a nursing home, the survivor of a divorce, the homeless person who has fallen through all the safety nets, you will discover great need. *And that is where Christ has promised to be found. "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. ..I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."* If you will answer those needs in Christ's Name, you will not only SEE Christ in the need of others, you will BE Christ to others. You will become part of His body, His hands and His feet and His mouth. You will be His means of creating faith in them and of increasing it in yourself. This is why in my estimation, the work some of our members perform at the Redeemer Crisis Center is exactly the kind of work the church needs to be about. When acts of love are tendered in the Name of Jesus Christ, miracles can happen.

Finding Christ in the needs of others is the best way I know of finding Him in yourself.

Amen.