

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

August 13, 2017

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 14-22-33

Here He Comes!

Gary is a computer analyst in his mid 40s. He has been married and divorced three times. After a year of dating a woman named Anne who was also divorced with a 7-year-old daughter, he and Anne went to their pastor to ask to be married. The counseling and wedding planning was going along fine until, about a month in, Gary began to develop a case of very cold feet.

When he shared this with Anne, she suggested he get away for a day to clear his head. So he started driving with no particular destination in mind, and ended up at a local lake. He got out of his car and began to walk, to soothe his jangled nerves. He came to a bench that looked out over the lake. He sat down and tried to breathe more deeply to unravel the knots in his stomach.

As he stared out at the lake, it was like looking into a soul mirror and things started to come clear. He saw that there were three knots in his stomach and each had a name. One was his fear that the odds were against him, that he would just keep repeating the same relationship patterns. The second was his fear of stresses coming at the fragile new family from outside—custody stress, job stress, and extended family pressures. The third was the hardest, knottiest fear of all; it was the fear that he was just not worthy of another human being's love, not worthy of God's love.

He had the right idea—taking time to find a quiet place to sit and name the knots in his stomach.

Two thousand years earlier, another man looks out over another lake from the mountaintop to which he has retreated to pray. Jesus: fully God, fully human. He is the Son of God, though those around him don't yet recognize him. His world has been rocked by the rejection of his hometown folks and the beheading of his cousin John the Baptist by Herod. He knows his time is coming. Crowds of needy people press in on him constantly.

At last he has sent the crowds away and convinced his disciples to get in a boat and cross over ahead of him. Finally he has found time to pray, perhaps lifting up each of his fears to his Father, allowing the comfort and healing and power of God to fill his heart, his mind.

But prayer time never lasts long enough. And before long, he is needed again.

We know three things about the situation of the disciples out there in the boat on the sea: they are battered by the waves, far from shore, and the wind was against them.

If it were just one out of three, the disciples might be able to get free. Battered by waves, but near the shore and no wind. Or far from shore, but no waves and no wind. Or wind, but close to shore and minimal waves.

If it were just two out of three even, maybe they could get free. Battered by waves and far from shore, but wind blowing you back to shore. Battered by waves and wind against you, but close to shore.

But three out of three means that they're in a situation they can't get out of by themselves, and in fact, that they are out of reach of any human help - and afraid!

"Our marriage is on the rocks, and it seems the problems are too deep for therapy" True

"I can't overcome this addiction by myself." He's right.

"This chronic pain is too much to bear.." She's right.

"I can't leave this relationship by myself." No you can't.
"We can't live with this grief any more." You're right.

These people are all right. We can't...on our human strength alone.

You see, we have good reasons to be afraid...

Whether it's a fear of the return of illness,
or the stability of a fragile relationship,
or loneliness after loss, or not being accepted by those we look up to
or whether we'll do well in a new chapter in our lives,
or what the future of our congregation is,
or the direction of our country....

You name it, there is a lot in our individual, our church, and our civic lives that can make us afraid. And fear can be debilitating. It sneaks up on us, paralyzes us, and makes it difficult to move forward at all, let alone with confidence. Fear, I believe, is one of the main things that robs us of the abundant life God intends for us.

But early in the morning, there comes someone walking toward the battered boat, even as it is being blown farther and farther from shore.

Here comes someone who just fed 5,000+ people with 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. Here comes someone who has the power to come to the place where you can't help yourself, where you are beyond all human help. Because if someone is beyond human help, Jesus goes straight to them.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, called this "prevenient Grace," the grace that "goes before." So every time we call on Jesus it is because he is already coming toward us. Every time we invite Jesus, we are actually RSVPing to his prior invitation.

There is an African American saying that we are always either going into a storm, in a storm, or coming out of a storm. Well, disciples are those who call on Jesus in all three conditions.

When our boat is battered by waves, we can call on Jesus.
When our boat is far from land, we can call on Jesus.
When our boat has the wind against it, we can call on Jesus.

Because he knows our sufferings. And he is already heading toward us. In fact, he has been here all along.

You know, Peter doesn't just flounder so much because he takes his eyes off of Jesus, but because he grows afraid. And, quite frankly, that fear is justified. It's a storm, for heaven's sake, raging powerfully enough to sink the boat, let alone drown a single person. He has, perfectly good reason to be afraid.

And notice that in response to Peter's fear, Jesus doesn't simply urge him to have more courage, or instruct Peter to keep his eyes on him. No, when Peter begins to sink, Jesus reaches out and grabs him, saves him from drowning and returns with him to the boat.

Us too! Jesus will not let us go. Jesus is with us. Jesus will not give up on us. Jesus will grab hold of us when we falter and restore us to where we can be of service.

The promise at the heart of this story, and indeed of our faith is this: that God will never give up, that God is with us and for us, that He, in the end, will do what we cannot. And this promise is the one thing I know of that helps us cope with and transcend fear.

Transcend, not defeat. Because fear is a part of our lives...Courage, after all, isn't the absence of fear, but the ability to take our stand and do what needs to be done even when we're afraid.

God's promise and prevenient grace gives us what we need to overcome our fear and send us out armed with courage and confidence to live and share God's abundant life. For, while fear is a powerful part of our lives, God's promise is more powerful still.

We left poor Gary sitting on the park bench in a situation in which he feared he was beyond forgiveness, beyond a new future, his boat battered by waves, the odds against him. He said that, as he sat there meditating, he felt rather than heard the words, "Let them go. You don't need them anymore. Let them go."

He opened his eyes and as he gazed out at the calm waters, three geese waddled up to him, prodding aggressively at his legs with their beaks. Finally, seeing that he had nothing for them, they made for the lake, and, one by one, took flight out over the water and up into the distance, like squawking blue angels in formation. He sat and stared at them until they were specks on the horizon. Then he got up and walked to his car, filled with a sense of peace.

That would make a great ending for a sermon, wouldn't it?

But let's be real. Our fears don't really fly off like that and never return. They circle back from time to time, honking and flapping their wings, sometimes landing in our souls and nudging around to see if we have food for them this time. A morsel of misery? A crust of criticism? A nugget of negativity?

But you know, they don't stay as long if our heart is already occupied by someone else. Someone who never stands on the shore watching us suffer, but is always walking toward us on the sea, stretching out a hand to us—with forgiveness, with love. Reaching out a hand to us that is both very human, and the very hand of God.

The question is, how are we going to respond? Are we going to keep focusing on the wind and the waves, or on the outstretched hand of our Lord?

Amen.