

"God of Grace" - Sermon for May 29, 2016

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

²⁸ 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, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, ^[b] he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³² 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."

Matthew 14:22-33

Chuck asked me if I wanted to preach on this Sunday quite a while ago, and I said yes, and of course I immediately started thinking about what I might preach on. I had a few different ideas, but nothing really stuck out to me. When it came down to it, though, I travelled so much this month that I decided I had better stick with something relatively easy. So this sermon is a sort of re-write of the keynote that I did a few months ago for the youth at Mid-Winter retreat.

So here we are, in the Gospel of Matthew, and for whatever reason, Peter actually says to Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Why Peter says this, I'm not sure, because generally this seems like a pretty bad idea to me. Regardless, the metaphor of this passage is so rich, that we can just dig into it and keep on digging.

As I was researching this passage from Matthew, I came across so much amazing material, and a lot of it has to do with stepping out of the boat. Being strong enough to step out of the boat, being brave enough to step out of the boat. In this metaphor, of course, the boat is safety, security, people and places and ideas that are familiar to us. And somewhere out there, in the scary storm, is Jesus, and he's telling you to get out of the boat and walk towards him. So you have to leave everything that you know and just trust that Jesus is going to see you safely through.

That's a beautiful metaphor, and one that I think many of us draw a lot of comfort from, but not the only point I want to make today. I'm also not going to make this an "O ye of little faith" sermon, and focus too much on Jesus saying to Peter, after Peter has started to sink, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

One of the struggles I have with the focus on "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" is that it is used so often to make people feel like failures and like bad Christians, and I don't think that's what church is for. But this is an important question – why did you doubt? To me, it has a fairly obvious answer: because I am human, and that is how I'm made.

So yes, I am going to doubt, but mostly I am going to doubt myself. At Mid-Winter we watched a video by Rob Bell, who is a pastor, motivational speaker, and author of the book

“Love Wins,” and he pointed out that the passage doesn’t really make clear that Jesus is saying, “Why did you doubt God?,” that Jesus might in fact be asking Peter, “Why did you doubt yourself?” We just had Pentecost a couple of weeks ago, and we learned again about how everyone is gifted BY GOD with gifts of the Holy Spirit. And yet, even knowing that, we still doubt *ourselves*, even if we never doubt God. And I don’t know where you all are coming from, but I know that some of us have never ever doubted God, and that some of us have, and that some of us currently are, and that’s all okay. Again, the point of this sermon is not to focus on the “little faith” of our human selves – wherever we are at in our journeys, God is with us.

One of the reasons this “o ye of little faith” focus can be so confusing is because we have an entire book, and it’s a really long book, talking about how powerful God is. And even if we didn’t have the Bible, maybe even in SPITE of having the Bible, many of us still have this soul-deep experience of God that is inexplicable and yet wonderful. So doubting God makes us feel really awful, because it feels like a betrayal.

If we’re going to talk about the power of God – that’s a REALLY easy topic. So, just to give a few pretty easy examples of God’s power that come out of the Bible - God created the heavens and the earth and the beasts of the field and the fish, God flooded the earth for 40 days and 40 nights, Jesus healed a whole bunch of people, and fed 5,000 people, and then died and came back and then the Holy Spirit came and everyone could understand each other - the list is quite extensive. So we may have no doubt in the power of God, but yet here we are reading this passage, and Peter is so relatable because he starts to sink, and that is an experience we all have had. That sinking confidence, and that rising fear.

One of the things I think we’re really great at, just humans in general, we’re really great at fooling ourselves. We are really great at thinking we’re doing something life-changing or earth-shattering when we’re actually not doing anything different. I’m thinking of a quote that many of us are familiar with from Susan B. Anthony, who said, “I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do, because I notice it always coincides with their own desires.” There’s a pretty healthy level of cynicism and skepticism there. And some of that is, I think, misplaced. After all, if we are all gifted by God, and we are, why should we not enjoy using those gifts? Often, those gifts are things that we enjoy doing, so there’s no reason to not pursue them. Yet we all know times when we, or others close to us, or people on the news, have claimed to be doing something revolutionary in the name of God, and it was really something that we or they just wanted to do anyways. Whether or not it brought about any greater measure of God’s peace, God’s justice, or God’s love, is debatable.

We all have done this. We all have had times in our lives when we said, “Look at me, I am stepping out of the boat!,” when we were actually just getting a cushion so we could make our seat more comfortable. When we actually have a chance to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God, we too often sit back and say, “Oh no, Jesus is not calling me to do that.”

Peter is so relatable in this passage. He is so human in his fear and anxiety. But while he is relatable, his example is also a little scary – a little intimidating. Because while we may sit comfortably on our seats and wait to hear a call from God that appeals to us, that doesn’t push us outside of our comfort zone, Peter actually asks God to call him out onto the water. Peter actually says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you.” Let’s talk about Peter’s boldness, Peter’s daring, and Peter’s self-awareness. When we started this metaphor, we said

the boat was safety and security. But the passage describes the boat as being far from land, and battered by the waves, and against the wind. If we're all going to be in this metaphor together, we have to recognize that our boat is probably not as safe and secure as we thought it was. The comfort that we draw from familiar people, places, and especially ideas may be giving us a false sense of security. Peter sees Jesus, and he says: here I am, Lord. And Jesus says, come.

And then, part way there, Peter realizes that maybe leaving the boat was not such a great idea after all, and he starts to sink. In this metaphor, so far, we've been jumping out of the boat, but we are fully capable of recognizing that the waters God calls us to walk on are not always going to be fun or easy. We are also fully capable of recognizing that some of the water may be calm, and some of it may be hard – none of this is mutually exclusive. And there will be times when we will sink, because we are human, and that's how we're made.

We focus on the power of God, the God who created the heavens and the earth, and we focus on how God can make it rain for forty days and nights, and Jesus can raise the dead, and so we think of course, I can walk across this water because God is powerful. We think, God is calling me to walk on this water and that means I will walk on this water and never sink. We are human, and so we confuse, "I believe God is all-powerful" with "I believe bad things will never happen to me," but bad things have happened and do happen and will happen, and so we sink as soon as we see that the wind is getting high.

"Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" "

This is the heart of it. Not the stepping out of the boat, though we will get back to it, and not the reproach from Jesus. In the richness of this metaphor, this is the ground of it all for me. We focus so much on God's power and the miracles, the suspensions of natural law, that God has granted, because they appeal to our deepest fears and our need for control. We focus so much on God's power that we forget about God's grace.

We hold in our minds the image of walking on water, and we forget that when we sink, and we will sink, because we're human and that's how we're made, that Jesus will immediately, IMMEDIATELY, reach out his hand and catch us.

We focus so much on picturing the God who stands just out of reach – this shiny, unreachable, unknowable God, and we forget about the God who stands beside us, who supports us and pushes us and carries us along our way.

We focus ourselves so much in our talents and our abilities, and we forget that they can only get us so far. God-gifted they may be, but only grace will bear us up when we fail.

Yes, our faith is grounded in God, who certainly could make us walk on water, if God wanted us to. But more importantly, our faith is grounded in God who knows that we will sink again and again, and who will help us up, again and again – as the gospel of John puts it – "from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."

Our faith is in God, who calls us, whether we ask or not, who calls us to bring justice, mercy, compassion, and peace, but who knows that we will falter and fumble but who calls us anyways.

At the beginning of this sermon, I said that this was easy, and in a lot of ways, this topic is. I believe fully and completely in a God of grace, a God who reaches out a hand to catch us when we start to sink, again and again.

This is a great comfort to me, but it is also I also a challenge. Because a God who extends grace to all, who catches us when we sink is a God who also says, "I know you will falter, and I know you will fall, but that is no excuse to not get out of the boat and start walking." Our fear of failure is so strong, so human, that it can be insurmountable. We are called anyways, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. Forgiveness and grace are not exemption from effort.

In spite of what I said about this being an easy topic - grace is not easy. Extending grace to people sounds pretty easy until we have to put it in practice, and extend grace to the person who has more than ten items in the express lane at the grocery store, or the colleague who airs their political opinions during meetings, or the friend who betrayed you. That's hard, that's really hard. It may be easy to believe that God extends grace to them, but it is hard to believe that we can. If that is the water God is asking us to walk on, we know we are going to sink. But if God extends grace to us, then God also extends grace to the people we don't like.

And then there's the grace that reaches wider and can feel a little further away from our day-to-day lives. The grace that means feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and inviting in the stranger. The grace that means if we are beloved children of God, so are they, and God calls us to serve them even if we think those are not the gifts we have, even if they make us uncomfortable, and even if we think they don't deserve it. If God gives grace to us, then God gives grace to them. Grace upon grace.

We serve a God so powerful, so mighty, and so gracious. God calls us off the boat because sitting in the boat, that storm-tossed boat, battered by the waves, far from land, and against the wind, may feel safe but is a form of sinking. We may as well step out of the boat because, as speaker and author Brian McLaren puts it, "We are already at sea."

We are already at sea.

We are already sitting in our own boats, probably making ourselves extremely comfortable, but if we stop and look around at the weather, we may realize that our boats are not as secure as we thought. This is where the metaphor can get a little fuzzy for me, because the image of Jesus standing on the water, on a stormy sea with rain and wind and maybe lightning and thunder all around him, is a powerful one. God is powerful and so while I like the image of the God who is calling us to be more than we are, I also like to think of Jesus as sitting next to us, on our boat, on our comfy cushions, and just waiting. As we cower in fear, or blithely ignore God's call, God is sitting with us in the boat, patiently extending us grace upon grace. A God who is both – a great mystery walking on water, and an embodiment of grace, immediately reaching out to catch us when we fall. God is calling us, and God is with us every step of the way. For that, thanks be to God, amen.