

Proper 14Ai – August 10, 2014
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15;
Matthew 14:22-33
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

“Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.” Many interpretations of this story about Peter’s brief walk on the water portray this as a story about faith, and Peter’s lack of it. After all, he steps out onto the water, as Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, as an Olympian on a balance beam, putting one sure foot ahead of the other.ⁱⁱ But as the wind comes up, Peter loses his focus; fear and doubt begin to overwhelm him; he gets that sinking feeling, as it were, and down he goes. Some conclude from this that if he had just kept his focus on Jesus or on what he was doing—if he had just had more faith and less doubt—then his distraction and fear wouldn’t have sunk him. That’s how many have interpreted this story.

But wait. Listen to what Peter says at the beginning of the story. Once Jesus appears on the sea walking towards the disciples, and tells them that it is he and not some ghost, Peter then says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Peter doubts Jesus, but his doubts are part of a larger mix of personal insecurity and impetuosity. Before Peter speaks, he already knows that the person on the water is Jesus—he doesn’t doubt that. Rather, he still doubts that Jesus is who he says he is and is demanding here some definitive proof of his divine identity. And he even uses the same opening line that the devil used when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness, “If you are the Son of God...” do these splashy things, excuse the pun. Or, in fact, Peter may not have even doubted that Jesus was the Lord, the Messiah, the Son of God, but wanted more, namely, to figure out his own part in all this. So, it’s not enough for Peter that Jesus is headed straight for the boat—Peter stops him before he gets in the boat, and puts himself out front of the other disciples and impetuously dares Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Set me apart from these others in the boat. Suspend the law of gravity. Make me do something spectacular and really splashy! Little did he realize just how splashy it would get. Barbara Brown Taylor adds,

“It is incredibly pompous [or at least impetuous] of Peter, but in this story, as in most of the other embarrassing stories about Peter, he is speaking for us. Is there anyone among us who has never asked God for an exception? Please, God, suspend the rules just this once and make me know that you are there. Heal me; help me; talk to me out loud. Leave me no room to doubt you [or myself] and I will believe. We have all got a little bit of the devil in us, asking Jesus to prove himself by doing something spectacular for us. We want the burden of proof to be on him, not us. We want him to single us out for special treatment, to let us climb out of the boat and do a solo no one else gets to do—and maybe even get extra credit for volunteering to do it ([Oh] look at him, so brave, so faithful, such a spiritual warrior!).”ⁱⁱⁱ

Many people give in to these temptations to be spectacular, or “most relevant,” or power-driven. We recall that Jesus himself faced these temptations. And others have to wrestle with these temptations regularly, be they political leaders or religious authorities, performers, or other folk in the public arena. And not only are those with strong egos thus tempted. As writer and educator Parker Palmer points out, a more common temptation for many of us is to think of ourselves as never good or beloved enough, as more or less mundane, irrelevant, and powerless.^{iv} This is the flip-side of the temptations felt by those in our world with stronger egos. Yet both contexts of temptation—from the stronger ego or the weaker ego—are rooted in the same illusion that we need what the devil is peddling if we are to be affirmed by others and lead lives of any consequence or worth. So, whether we lust after them or whether we regard them as out of reach, these devilish temptations—to be spectacular, or to seek self-affirming relevance, or to be driven by power—are, at the same time, both the most common and popular images underlying our world and our lives. And yet, these are also the most misleading distractions to living a life that is true to yourself.

The temptation to perform an act that has no rationale except to make yourself known is an insidious one in our day—in an age when, as Andy Warhol said, everyone can expect to be famous for fifteen minutes. Every day we witness the pain of people who need to cry out, “Look! See Me! I’m here! I have power! I count!” That cry comes in many forms, some of them pathological: the loner who guns down people at a movie theater or school to make a mark; or people who live self-destructive lifestyles to make themselves known. And less pathological can be the lone hero, the spectacular performer, the daredevil, and even some popular activists, who act in ways that fulfill their needs but who have little or no sense of a relational, reciprocal or responsible connection to others. The temptation to be spectacular—like Peter walking on the water—may seem laughable in the abstract, but some of its manifestations are the stuff of modern tragedy.

Jesus’ response to Peter’s insistence in having Jesus command him to walk on water could have been different than the one word response he gave, “Come.” As Barbara Brown Taylor put it, “He could have said, ‘Who do you think you are, Simon Peter? Sit back down and find your oar!’ But that was not what Peter needed. What Peter needed was a couple of steps on the water (to cure his doubt) and then a nose dive into the stormy water (to cure his pomposity).”^v Peter was certainly no longer in any doubt who Jesus was at this point. As Peter experiences that sinking feeling, both spiritually and physically, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Notice that Jesus offered his hand in help first and immediately, and only then after Jesus fishes the soggy Peter out of the sea and into the boat, he says to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” So often, we have heard that question from Jesus as an accusation, a rebuke. I believe it is not an accusation *per se*, but more a comment on Peter’s grandstanding and a kind of encouragement. Given Jesus’ relationship with his disciples, I think the question was anything but an accusation. Add a little laughter to Jesus’ voice; and to that add a little encouragement for playful self-examination and see this as a teaching moment for Jesus with one of his dearest disciples: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”—you have come so far! Think about it, why didn’t you believe? You can do this! But just know, when you have that sinking

feeling, no matter where or how it originates, be sure to reach out for the hand that is always reaching for yours.”^{vi}

On the one hand, this could be a story that calls for heroes of the faith, for people like Peter who, albeit a bit misguided and too impetuous, is nonetheless called to risk his life to prove that Jesus is who he says he is. But as Barbara Brown Taylor concludes,

“It may just as well be a story about the other eleven disciples, who never thought of themselves as particularly heroic, who never dreamed of putting Jesus to the test, who were willing to row against the wind until he got into the boat with them, no matter how long it took. They were not looking for exemptions. They were just looking for their Lord to join them where they were, and that is when the miracle happened—not while he and Peter were out doing the fancy stuff on the water, but [rather] once he had everyone back together in the boat. That was when the wind ceased—shhh—just like that. And those in the boat worshiped him saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”^{vii}

ⁱ See Lent 1 (Year B).

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, Bread of Angels (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997), pp. 120-122.

ⁱⁱⁱ Taylor, *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

^{iv} Parker J. Palmer, The Active Life (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 99-119.

^v Taylor, *Ibid.*, p. 121.

^{vi} Barbara Brown Taylor adds further possible comments from Jesus in this vein, “‘I was headed straight for you. I told you who I was. If you had kept your seat for me one minute more I would have been sitting right next to you, you and all the others, with no need for that circus stunt out on the water.’ He only says that to Peter by the way. There is no rebuke for the others, who had sense enough to stay in the boat, hauling the oars together [in the stormy sea] until their Lord came to them. Only Peter left the boat and the community to do a solo—thinking perhaps that it would go down in history as a sign of great faith—never guessing that Jesus [and later, Matthew’s gospel] would call it the exact opposite.” - Taylor, *Ibid.*, p. 122.

^{vii} Taylor, *Ibid.* p. 122.