

In the name of One God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.

I was reading, thinking, praying and working on a sermon this week –and none of those things get done very well unless I’m also listening to music. So, as is my habit, I had a jazz station on internet radio when Tropical Storm Eduard took out the internet connection. Then I made a huge mistake, I clicked on the stash of music stored on my computer and started playing Allison Krause and Union Station. It was a huge mistake because the instrumental jazz I usually play helps me concentrate on my work, but Allison Krause makes me sit up and listen.

So anyway ... I had the random play button on and started playing the Union Station Live album. Instantly, I heard Allison Krause’s beautiful rendition of Keith Whitley’s song, “*When You Say Nothing At All.*” Then thankfully, I couldn’t help but get a mental picture of Simon Peter and his relationship with Jesus from this morning’s Gospel reading.

There’s a truth in your eyes  
Sayin’ you’ll never leave me  
The touch of your hand says  
you’ll catch me if ever I fall.

“Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him .... When they got into the boat, the wind ceased, ....<sup>1</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 14:31-32 (NRSV)

This wonderful story from Matthew tells us of Jesus' miracle of water walking – but the message it gives us is so much more. St. Augustine said that this story was an allegory for Jesus and the Church. He said that the Church was represented by the boat the disciples were in. That's an analogy often drawn – thus the reason the part of the church you're sitting in is called the nave, coming from the same root word as do “navy” and “navigate,” and you'll notice that many church ceilings look like the upside down hull of a boat. So Augustine said that the Church may get thrown around by the storms and high seas of life – and he equated the devil with the power that keeps the storms blowing – but with Jesus' help the Church can weather whatever storm blows. I like that analogy, but I think the story of Peter's interaction with Jesus tells me something even more meaningful today.

As I've said before, Peter is sort of the perfect example of Christian discipleship for us. He can show us faith in action. But he also shows us what NOT to do by virtue of his impetuosity followed by failure of faith. And every time, Jesus takes him back and saves him from the world – and from himself. What an example for us.

This morning's story follows immediately after last Sunday's feeding of the multitude. And remember that even *before* Jesus healed, preached, taught and fed that day, He was looking for a place to get away from the crowds; to rest and pray. So, after the crowds had been fed, Jesus sent the disciples in the boat to go across the Sea of Galilee and He stayed behind to go up on the mountain alone to pray.

The Sea of Galilee is about 8 miles across at its widest point. That's a pretty easy sail if the winds are right. But that night the sea and the wind were both working mightily against the disciples. Matthew tells us that the disciples were "far from shore" and that it was "early morning" when Jesus approached the boat. Other versions of the Bible translate "early morning" as "the fourth watch," which would be between 3-6:00am. And In John's version of this story, he says the boat had travelled some 3-4 miles<sup>2</sup>. So ... the disciples, who were tired *before* they got in the boat, have now spent most of the night trying to get 8 miles – and they've only made it halfway.

Let's try to put ourselves in that place for a minute. Two days earlier they had gotten news that John the Baptist had been executed by Herod. Andrew and John had been disciples of John the Baptist before they met Jesus. They loved John, as did his cousin, Jesus. They had not been able to mourn his passing because of the crowds that kept pressing in on them. They tried to get away by boat, but Jesus told them to put back in to shore because He had such compassion for the people. Then there was that incredible miracle of the feeding. Now they were emotionally spent and physically exhausted – and they found themselves stuck in the middle of the lake, in a crushing storm, too tired to fight the rest of the way across. And then they saw Him walking toward them – 3 miles from the shore – and they were petrified because in their state,

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<sup>2</sup> John 6:19 (NRSV)

they thought it was a ghost. But instead of cowering as the others did, their unofficial leader, Peter, stood up to get a better look.

Jesus, still walking toward them on top of the waves, said, “Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.” Just as a little aside here, this is one of those places where I think the NRSV messes up in its translation. Our Bible says that Jesus tells them, “It is I.” Another translation for that phrase is “I Am.” I love the image of Jesus saying, “Don’t be afraid. I Am.” Since “I Am,” was the name that God gave when Moses asked, “(If) they ask me, ‘What is (your) name?’ what shall I say to them?<sup>3</sup>” And when Peter hears his master’s voice, he responds, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

I’ve got to tell you, in that place, at that time, I would not have said what Peter did. I don’t know about you, but given the position the disciples were in, and knowing that they had seen Jesus still a storm before this (Matt 8:23), I think my response would have been, “Lord, if it is you, get us out of this!” But not Peter. He was a true disciple. He wanted to do what his master did, say what his master said, *know* what his master knew. Peter wanted to walk where Jesus walked – even on the water.

So Jesus calls Peter to him and Mr. Enthusiasm jumps out of the boat and starts walking in the Way of the Lord. But what happened to him next? Like his name, *Πετρος* (*petros* or rock) he started to sink. And this is the ultimate example for us, I think.

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 3:13 (NRSV)

We are all very much like Peter in our day-to-day lives. We want so much to be disciples – those who devote their lives to learning from Jesus and trying to live as Jesus lived. We want to have the great faith on which Jesus could establish the Church – we want to be the cornerstones that Jesus told Peter he was. But like Peter, when we lose our concentration, when we take our eye off the ball, even for a moment, we sink. Isn't that true of you? I know it is of me. No matter how badly I want to be a great Christian, let some stumbling block get thrown into my way, and I'll look at it long enough to trip.

It's sort of like the parable of the sower that we heard a few weeks ago. I want to be the good soil that the seed lands in and it grows and multiplies and becomes 3 or 6 times what it was in the beginning. But too often I'm like the rocky soil – like Peter. Faith springs up in me quickly, with great exuberance, and then something distracts it and because its roots are shallow, it dries up.

If you share these same tendencies, “Take heart, it is (Jesus); do not be afraid<sup>4</sup>.” No matter how much we may lack in our ability to be good disciples, Jesus never gives up on us. Πετρος the rock, sank that early morning in the Sea of Galilee, but Jesus was there, hand out, at the ready, to grab him and pull him into the boat. The same is true of us.

As the Fall approaches, we'll have Rally Day, where we can all look at the ministries available here at St. John's. We can all decide where our own desire to be

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 14:27 (NRSV)

disciples might take shape. If you see something that sparks an interest, sign up. Don't worry about "what if I can't do it?" Remember Peter and the incredible storm; and put your hand out to receive a boost from the Lord. Soon there will also be Vestry elections and the annual pledge campaign. When you think about leadership of this parish, and when you consider how much of your time, talent and treasure should go back to the God who gave it to you, "Take heart, it is (Jesus); do not be afraid." Step out in faith – just as Peter did. Even if you start to sink, with the help of our Savior, and the support of your St. John's family, you'll end up right here in the boat with the rest of us. And thanks be to God for that.

Amen.