

I would guess that Jesus walking on the water is just about the most well-known miracle story in the Bible. We have all heard countless jokes on this image and the phrase “walking on water” is used in all kinds of ways. It is so familiar that there is the possibility that we don’t really even hear it, and we miss the point entirely. We have to understand that Jesus did not perform miracles in order to impress people, but rather to provide glimpses of the reality of God’s presence in the world and in their lives.

In the Gospel today, the only reason Peter stepped out of that boat was that he knew who Jesus was and it gave him courage that he would not otherwise have had. I think one of the things that endeared Peter to Jesus was that he was a person of action. There are plenty of people with great intentions, many who would say that they are believers, some who are going to get around to it one of these days, but oftentimes the perceived risk prevents them from stepping out in faith right now as Peter did. Of course, one of the inevitable results was that he made mistakes. This incident on the Sea of Galilee was one of them. Who in the world did he think he was trying to walk on the water in the first place? What a crazy idea!

When the disciples were frightened by the sight of Jesus walking on the water, he quickly reassured them that it was him and they had nothing to fear. That was enough for everyone but dear Peter. He just couldn’t stand it. Jesus had said that there was nothing to fear, and Peter took him at his word, “If it is you, Lord, then bid me come to you on the water!” Jesus simply said, “Come.” And Peter did just that.....for a few steps anyway. Suddenly reality hit him in the face, and he thought, “what in the world am I doing here? This is impossible, I can’t walk on water!” His faith sagged, and so did his body right down into the water. He knew enough to yell to Jesus for help and probably felt a little foolish as the other smiling disciples helped him back into the boat. But we need to notice that Peter did take action, maybe not the best decision, but he had stepped out in faith. We know that Peter made many more mistakes, the most notorious being the three-time denial of knowing Jesus. Nevertheless, he was the “Rock” upon which Jesus said he would build his Church.

As members of the Church built upon that Rock, we have a lot to learn from Peter. How many times in our lives have we started to do something only to realize the potential cost or possible negative consequences and decided that maybe we should not go ahead? On the other hand, how many times have we held back from doing or saying something and then decided that the risk was worth it and went ahead and acted? Forgetting whether or not we were successful, which decision felt better? Did we feel more alive when we held back in fear, or stepped out in faith? Peter made mistakes because he stepped out in faith as a way of life. In his own bumbling and very human way, Peter was simply following the example of his Lord who took risks every day of his life in words and actions as he acted out of his faith.

I am certainly not suggesting that we are called to take risks like running in front of a bus, or spending money we don’t have, or making irresponsible decisions. But I do believe that we are called to take some risks based upon our being followers of Jesus. He has called us to lives of faith, not fear, but taking him at his word is a real challenge. Each time we hesitate to step out in faith we have allowed our fears to play the dominant role in our lives. It is really pretty simple. The more we allow our fear to call the shots, the less our faith can grow. We watch the things Jesus did and listen to his challenge to us to love God and our neighbor. Sometimes we join Peter as we say, “Lord, if it is you, enable me to walk on the water,” or, “give me the faith and the courage to do this.” He says to us as he said to Peter, “come.” We jump out of the boat with enthusiasm and find ourselves doing things we never thought we could ever do. But then, we begin to think about it, to doubt and analyze, and like Peter, we begin to sink.

OK, here is where it gets a little squirmy for most of us as we move from the general idea to specifics. I think this story can apply to perhaps the most challenging yet rewarding aspect of life, the relationships we are in. You know that person you are angry at, the one you are pretty sure is also angry at you? When you imagine yourself walking up to him or her and saying, “I would like to do whatever I can to heal our relationship,” can you feel that doubt rising up within you? It is very real, isn’t it? We all know what Jesus

would say, "Come, it is the right and loving thing to do. Trust in me, take the risk, step out of the boat, and start walking." That other all too familiar voice insists, "Just leave it alone and stay in the boat. If you venture out you may end up feeling foolish, you could be embarrassed, you might well be rejected." What a lot of us will do is to hesitate, fully analyze the situation, consider the possible cost, maybe even plan the best approach, and then wait for the most appropriate opportunity to act. In other words, we stay safely in the boat sitting on a bait bucket waiting until.....until what?

Every one of us is involved in various relationships with other people. Some are good and healthy and add joy and peace to our daily lives. But, they all are not like that, are they? We all are in some relationships that are somewhat fragile, others that are a little unclear, some that are downright unpleasant, and also those that are forgotten. The Gospel call is for us to step out and do something about the ones that need healing or forgiveness or perhaps a new beginning. The idea can make our stomachs a little tight, our breathing somewhat shallow, our blood pressure elevate, and our minds listing all of the reasons we need to stay in the boat. How about those unhealthy relationships we have forgotten? Well, if we can think of them, they are not forgotten, are they? They might be the ones that can cause the most harm as they chip away at our sense of well-being as they remain on the almost but not quite invisible "to-do list."

The Great Commandment Jesus gave us is great because it is the key to a peaceful and happy life. We are called to love our Creator the best we can, and also our neighbor which unfortunately includes those people with whom we have broken or unhealthy relationships.

Many of us have felt an inward yearning to do something about this for a long time. We have thought about it, wondered about it, but have not actually done anything about it. Jesus says, "If it is, indeed, God who is calling you, it is the right thing to do regardless of the obstacles." One of the saddest things in the world is a person continually murmuring, "If only I had....." whatever the thought might have been. The point is that God is with us, no matter what, in our successes and failures, in our joys and sorrows. The question for us people of faith is to what extent our relationship with God empowers our choices.

What happens to us when we want to step out in faith but do not follow through? The same thing that happened to Peter that day on the Sea of Galilee. As long as he acted on his faith and trusted in God to enable him to do what seemed impossible, he was fine. As soon as he allowed the inevitable doubts to take over, his attention shifted away from Jesus and centered on himself. Peter's faith was not different from yours or mine. It was not perfect nor complete because faith never is. He proved that many times, most spectacularly in his three-fold denial of his Lord, but his faith was enough as he acted on it. Our choice is not really whether we have faith or doubt as we all have a dose of each. The decision has to do with which one has the most power in our lives. Jesus assured us that even faith the size of a tiny mustard seed is sufficient to enable us to do whatever God calls us to do. The truth is that whatever faith we have is a gift from our Creator and that gift is enough. If we choose to wait to face those damaged relationships until we have enough faith that our doubts are gone, we will never step out of the boat. I believe that God calls you and me to a kind of "holy recklessness," the kind Peter showed us. He made mistakes. He looked foolish at times. He often did not understand, but, oh, Peter really lived his life! I believe that each of us has been called and empowered to do the same, and I also believe that we will discover that, with God's help, the water is not nearly as choppy and dangerous as it looks from the safety of the boat. We cannot fulfill the Great Commandment to love God and our neighbor unless we step out of the boat. Amen