

August 9, 2020 (Focus: Matthew 14:22-33) “The Boat”

It’s like a video on the evening news of someone trying to drive through a flooded street, and the car starting to get swept away in the flood waters. Or it’s like one of those videos that someone posts on Facebook with the caption “look at the stupid thing this person did.” We watch Peter once again putting his actions before where his faith is, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Yet when he is out on the water, he suddenly comes to his senses, literally, and notices how strong the wind is and how high the waves are, and he begins to doubt. Yet Jesus still saves him, even if Peter may not believe in him to the degree he did before, Jesus still saves him.

Much of our Bible reading and our faith life itself tend to focus on the gospel solely as a message only of personal comfort and assurance. In our story today, we hear about Jesus rescuing Peter on that stormy sea, and we understand it to say to us that Jesus will rescue us in the storms of life, pulling us up out of the depths when we feel like we're drowning. We have heard time and again that one of the overarching themes of the bible is that “God saves,” and we hold onto to that as a message of blessing and comfort to us in our time of need.

But there is more to our story here: one relatively short but powerful sentence: when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. The storm is calmed only after they are back in the boat, with Jesus.

Biblical scholars and even less learned readers of the gospels have seen this boat as a metaphor for the church. After all, Jesus called them to be in the boat and to go ahead to the other side of the sea, just as he calls us to be the church and to go out into the world to share the good news in deed and in word. This sense of the church as the boat that Jesus calls his disciples out in is even reflected in many church buildings, as noted in the photos here. The part of the church building where the pews have been, where the congregation sits, is called the “nave,” which comes from the Latin “navis,” which means ship.

So what if the boat full of disciples is *the church*, not only then but today? In our own day, the church is rocked by storms of one kind or another. For some churches the source of chaos and destruction comes from inside, people fighting over control of and direction of a congregation, fighting over hymnals or pews vs. chairs or even how the church bazaar should be run. The church’s own behavior,

especially when it is judgmental or unwelcoming toward one group of people or another, has led people to leave the church.

But almost all churches these days are trying to ride out the storm of societal changes, with a growing anti-religion movement, and without the setting aside of Sunday morning for only church.

One of the things about storms in general is that they usually pass by fairly quickly. Just this past week, Hurricane Isaias took less time traveling up the east coast of the country than the Weather Channel spent before hand warning about it. But generally it seems that the storms a church has to ride out are not so quick, things like secularization of society, decreased membership, financial shortfalls, and now COVID-19.

Plymouth has certainly come through some storms in its history, including two fires, the decision to become Open and Affirming, and a pastoral issue. We could have never come through those storms, and we won't get through this storm we are in now, nor will we get through any future storms, if we think we are riding this storm out on our own. The disciples were just a bunch of guys out in the storm, until they recognized Jesus with them in the boat. With Jesus with them, they could survive the storm.

When we do things just as a group of people, we are more likely to feel as if we are out on our own in the middle of a stormy sea. When we make decisions based solely on the idea that this is what a business would do, or when we worry more what others would think than whether we are following the gospel and our mission statement, then we are like that boat full of disciples being tossed in the sea. But if we remember that as a church, as a congregation, we are not just a collection of people, but we are a group of people who have covenanted together, understanding ourselves to be walking with the living Christ, that we are God's people doing God's work here on earth for the good of God's creation, then we are like those disciples recognizing that Jesus is in the boat with them, and we can feel calm even with lots of storms and chaos around us.

We are a community of faith. Not a community of strict creeds and dogma, not "faith" as a noun, but "faith" as a verb, as a sense that we love and trust in God, no matter what life is currently throwing at us, and offer love in return. When we remember that we are a community of faith, then even amid our doubts, our despairs, our struggles, and any uncertainty the world can throw at us, we will get through the storms, together, with Christ permeating everything we do.

We are a community of faith, with Jesus and God with us as we go forth to love and serve. We are a community of faith. Thanks be to God!

Making an Origami boat (have to remind us that we will ride out storm, for living Christ with us)

<https://www.thesprucecrafts.com/easy-origami-boat-instructions-4057416>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IAZS3jtfwc>

Offering the mission statement, as a prayer:

The mission of Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ is:

-To joyfully celebrate God's love and the gospel of Jesus Christ in our worship, our teaching, and our lives;

-To create a diverse, accepting faith community that welcomes all and empowers all to accept the grace God freely offers to each of us, no matter who we are or where we are in life's spiritual journey; and

-To develop, demonstrate, and strengthen Christian discipleship by reaching out to all God's people, caring for those in need, and seeking to lead the world toward love, justice, and peace.

Let us turn our hearts and minds again to God in prayer.

We turn to you, gracious God, in prayer today as a congregation. Each one of us is capable of praying for our own needs, and the needs of others. But we pray today as a congregation, together in faith and hope, together for one another, together for the good of others. Bless us in our coming together, for together each of us is blessed, and together all can be blessed.

We continue to live in uncertain times, and living in uncertainty and living with bad news for so long, with no end in sight, can be so very exhausting. We are tired, we are weary, we are worn. Give us rest in body, and in spirit. Give us peace in our world, and in our inmost being. Give us hope, bright hope for today and all our tomorrows. We are frustrated and angry with inaction and wrong actions by others and by our leaders; bless us that our frustrations and anger will not keep us from what actions we can take for the good of our community, especially those most vulnerable.

We are grateful for this time of communal prayer, helping us to experience that we do not carry the spiritual load alone, that we do not struggle alone, and that you, gracious God, intend good for us. Help us to see beyond the questions and concerns to see all the good that is being done, all the people helped, all the acts of kindness and goodness. Help us to be the good that the world needs, helping people, offering acts of kindness and goodness wherever we can. Grant us your strength and courage and power of love, for we seek to be your people, your heart, your peace, your hope in all that we do.

There are so many among us, in our community, and in the world in need of your healing compassion and care – grant all in need an experience of your renewing touch, especially...

We hold in our prayers today especially those living in facilities that are in lock down, many of whom struggle with new ways of communicating. We give great thanks for all the staff attending them: keep them strong and kind, and give them rest.

Silent prayer/meditation

Holy God, mysterious and wondrous, bless us today and in the days ahead. Help us to proclaim in word and deed that the living Christ is in us and among us and for us all and all creation. Guide us to follow him always, even as we pray together the words he taught us to pray to you, saying, Our Father...