

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: August 13, 2023

Stay in the Boat

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this eleventh Sunday after Pentecost. I've heard quite a few sermons on today's Gospel text that basically come down to a commendation of Peter for having the faith to get out of the boat and attempt walking on the water. The problem is usually put in a way that describes Peter as taking his eyes off of Jesus and having his faith falter. But Jesus, as is expected, is there to save him.

So, these sermons often conclude by encouraging people to be courageous, get out of the boat and keep their focus on Jesus. Okay, that may be good encouragement for some people to put their faith into action, but it kind of misses the point of the story. After all, when they get back in the boat, the other disciples don't congratulate Peter for almost walking on water and they don't wish him better luck next time! The real hero in the story is Jesus, whom the disciples worship for the first time in the Gospel of Matthew as the Son of God.

Earlier in Matthew Chapter 8 we have the stilling of the water by Jesus as the disciples in a boat struggle with mother nature. But it is important to keep these two stories straight in order to watch the evolution of Jesus' identity. In the first story in Chapter 8, there is a great storm, waves swamp the boat, and the disciples fear for their lives while Jesus sleeps. Then waking Jesus up with the plea, "Lord, save us!" Jesus calls them cowardly and "ones of little faith." Jesus then rebukes the winds and sea, and brings about the calm. In response, the disciples are amazed and can only wonder what sort of person Jesus is, that "even the winds and sea obey him."

In this first story of Chapter 8, Jesus is a mystery. However, in Chapter 14, that we are reading here today, they now call Jesus "the Son of God". And what of Peter? Why have him attempt to walk on water only to fail? Well, there is the obvious difference. Jesus has no trouble walking on water – he is the Son of God. Peter, like us - only a disciple and without Jesus is bound to fail. Which leads me not to focus on the water or the walking but instead on the boat.

We should note that in both stories, Jesus ends up in the boat with the disciples, not alongside it and not on a distant shore, but in the boat itself. In the earlier story Jesus was in the boat, but sleeping. In the second story they are moving forward.

After the resurrection it should be noted that a ship was one of the earliest symbols for Christianity. There are, as you can imagine, many symbolic meanings for a boat or ship. But the final and most revered meaning is as a means of conveyance between this world and the next. The representation of a boat or ship upon the water as the way to take the soul to the other side after death is seen in the Egyptian religion, and many other cultures of Jesus' time.

In the early Christian tradition, in which earthly life was seen as a pilgrimage, the ship of the church transports the faithful through the stormy seas of the world to a heavenly home. With Jesus' identity unknown in the first boat story, it begs the question was the church, or actual faith tradition of the time - asleep? And now with the recognition of Jesus, does it awaken?

For the disciples, early Christians, and even ourselves, the boat is a place of refuge when surrounded by adversity. All one needs to do is think of the various ministries this church takes on, to know that we are open and affirming and interested in the welfare of our community and others. We are in the boat.

In fact, in Portugal, I had the opportunity to see several chapels that were literally build as a boat but upside down leaving the ceiling ribbed with wooden lathing. Most of the wooden lathing used over history has given the impression that spaces of worship are modeled after a ship.

I once heard Holy Innocents Church in San Francisco described with its stain glass window of the Nativity in the back of the church by the altar, and its stain glass depiction of the crucifixion in the front of the church, with its wooden laden ceiling as, the church being the boat for the voyage of life to death, and of course the resurrected Jesus depiction was in the Narthex.

Safety and salvation are experienced in the church because Jesus is in our midst. And just like Peter, the church too can take its eyes off its purpose. However, like our Gospel tells us, Jesus will again reach out to us. We also need to remember that a ship is not a static symbol. It is a vehicle used to get somewhere. Ultimately, we may ask, "Why did Jesus and the disciples cross the sea?" They wanted to get to the other side to minister to those people over there. Which begs the question, why are we in this boat we call church? Then we must remember, Jesus walked on the water, but the disciple could not. One is Divine, the other human.

So maybe this Sunday we will not focus on Peter's faith, or lack of it, but maybe on the Son of God in our midst, allowing us briefly at times with a lot of faith, to walk on water as we keep this church moving forward to minister to those who need to hear Jesus is the Son of God, not only in words but in deeds.

Maybe we should not focus on walking away but rather on staying in the boat, perhaps by helping others who may be sinking get to safety. Let us prepare by getting the supplies we need, volunteering for the different ministries this church has need of, and opening ourselves to consider ways that Christ the Lord can get involved in more community activities. Let's stock up our boat, let us strengthen our faith and focus on Jesus the Son of God, and see where the Holy Spirit blows us.

We need to realize that for many, we are the boat for those whose faith is sinking, for those who need refuge from stormy seas, for those who need a Divine handout. Let's not focus today on leaving the boat and failing, but instead on being safe as we prepare for future ministry with Jesus the Son of God in our midst. Amen.