

Sermon : "Getting to the Other Side of Fear" - 6-24-18

Grace and Peace – Pause and Reflect...

This week has been difficult for our country, it has been difficult for me and I am guessing it has been for you too. No matter where you land on immigration issues, it is probably difficult. For many it is about core beliefs and how one treats one's neighbor no matter where that neighbor is from. For others it's about protecting this country and its borders so we might be safe. Hearing the stories of those seeking asylum has been so difficult and heart wrenching, those traveling from very dangerous parts of the world only to find out that they will be arrested once they step onto US soil before they even have the opportunity to ask for asylum. It is such a time of trial and struggle for those who face separation from their children and families and those who have already experienced it.

Even though we all face trials in life at times some trials are easier overcome. My trials as someone living in a first world situation are incomparable to those who have made the trek across the many miles and countries to get away from persecution of gangs and drug lords. Whatever the trial is it can take all the faith we can muster at times to survive. Our gospel reading is a valuable tool to teach us about teaching getting to and through the issues which seem to block us from "getting to the other side."

We have all heard the old joke; "Why did the chicken cross the road? It is an example of anti-humor, which is a type of indirect humor that involves the joke-teller delivering something which is intentionally not funny, but just by delivering it is sort of funny. The listener expects a traditional punchline, but they are instead given a simple statement of fact. "Why did the chicken cross the road?" Of course...to get to the other side. It has become iconic as a generic joke that most children first learn to tell. There have been alternative versions of this joke:

3. Why did the chicken cross the basketball court? // He heard the referee calling fowls
4. Why did the turkey cross the road? // To prove he wasn't chicken
5. Why did the chicken cross the road, roll in the mud and cross the road again? // Because he was a dirty double-crosser
6. Why didn't the chicken skeleton cross the road? // Because he didn't have enough guts
7. Why did the chicken cross the playground? // To get to the other slide
8. Why did the dinosaur cross the road? // Because chickens hadn't evolved yet
9. Why did the turtle cross the road? // To get to the shell station
10. Why did the horse cross the road? // Because the chicken needed a day off

Jesus says: "Let us go across to the other side," for what specific reason we are told in our Gospel. They also go at night which is always more dangerous than daytime, especially at that time without the conveniences that are found in modern boats. Night time boat travel in sketchy weather doesn't make a good combination in "my boat" or point of view. When the only purpose seems to be to get to the other side it seems better to wait until the light of day and after the possible storm has calmed down. Yet the disciples get into the boat with Jesus and they are on their way into a perfect storm!

My grandmother loved to ride in boats but she was afraid of water. Sort of an oxymoron, if you will, a contradiction of thoughts and actions. She didn't let her fear of water get in the way of her enjoyment riding on the boat. What I remember, is that she had some requirements for her boat rides; of course she needed to be wearing a life jacket (when I was a kid in MN you only needed to have enough life jackets for each person in the boat, but they didn't need to be wearing one,) the boat had to be a "nice size" not too small and not too many people in the boat – I think she thought that too many people would rock the boat in a dangerous way. Grandma also didn't like going boating late in the day, because she was afraid that the boats might run into each other if it got too dark or if it looked like rain or it was

too windy – all of those make sense to me. The other thing I always thought was cute was that she had to have a scarf on when she was in the boat and pretty much anytime she was outside. She had her hair done every week.

One of the main reasons I think my grandma was afraid of water is that she didn't know how to swim, and somewhere along her journey of her life she had a bad experience with water, or heard bad stories about water. She once told me; "you know that you can drown in only a couple of inches of water – that's not very much." I can't help but think that this is why she preferred to take showers over baths, but that might be something I created in my head because she only had a shower in her bathroom and she didn't like water. What I never really thought about was how brave she was to take boat rides, when she was so afraid of water. She didn't do anything that she was afraid of or didn't want to do, so somehow her enjoyment of the boat ride was greater than her fear – at least for a short time.

The disciples fear overcame them as they were making their way to the other side on the boat during the storm. They were being tossed here and there and distraught that Jesus was able to sleep through the intensity of the storm, seemingly without a care in the world – or at least a care about them and their safety. It is amazing to me that Jesus was able to sleep through such an intense situation. I have never been on a cruise, but it wasn't that long ago that one cruise ship got caught in a terrible storm and people were thrown from their beds and tossed here and there as the ship made its way to safety. Has this ever happened to you?

Fear of water, fear of weather, fear that someone won't follow through with a commitment, fear of disease, fear of potential loss or the death of a loved one, just fear in general can impede in one's life and control it. Jesus told his disciples to get in the boat at night so they could go to the other side, they didn't ask questions – they followed his commands. Thinking about it, I would have responded differently, I would have asked some questions based on the circumstances; could it wait until morning when it would be easier to see, the weather looks bad, how about waiting?

Why are we going to the other side again? I call those clarifying questions – but they might seem like questions of doubt or challenge to the Savior of the World.

The disciples followed – they had faith until they didn't or until the storm started tossing the little boat and the disciples in a way that seemed to go beyond their faith. Sometimes it that way for us too, one's faith is strong until a tragedy or difficulty arises and then it is wondered where is God in the situation? Is God just sleeping in the stern, not really caring about the war in Afghanistan, or the problems in our Government, or for the separation of families seeking asylum? Is God there? Does God care? Have I or we lost our faith because of the difficulties which go on all around us each day? Especially when it seems to become more chaotic than ever imagined?

For some it is like my grandma who liked to take boat rides but was afraid of the water, having to get through the fear and anxiety of the situation to be able “be” in the situation. When fear overwhelms someone there are 3 basic tenants that happen: Fight, Flight or Freeze. The first one has been very noticeable this week, especially among mothers of whatever political party they belong. The concept of having a child ripped from ones arms is beyond my understanding, and I'm not a mother but those of you who are understand it in a way differently than others do. There is this “mama bear” instinctual thing that happens to protect a child and it doesn't have to your own, it just happens.

Many cannot cope with the fear or anxiety they are experiencing so they “take flight” they leave so they won't have to deal with any of it. Anxiety and fear are closely related, and follow some of the same patterns. When someone has a panic attack the biggest worry is having another attack, so the inclination is to flee but how do flee panic, anxiety or fear when it comes from within? You can't really, but in the moment it feels like you should.

Then there are those who freeze, or don't want to get involved. It's that sort of “deer in the headlights” look when one doesn't know what to do so they do nothing or if

you are a good Lutheran and someone close to you has lost a loved through death in some way, you offer to mow their lawn or bring them a casserole of food. When we freeze, we don't know what to say, but we often can do things as long as they aren't too emotional. Freezing and being a Pacifist aren't the same. Pacifism is an intention to not engage in war or other destructive activities, or be involved in organizations that promote these types of things. Freezing is a reaction to a stressor; fear, anxiety, perceived danger and can be paralyzing.

So what were the disciples experiencing on that boat? They were experiencing all three of these reactions – fighting with each other about whether they should wake Jesus or not (no doubt that for me) It would have been hard for any of them to take "Flight or Flee" because they were on a boat on rough water, but they were being tossed up in the air. But they were fleeing or taking flight from their belief about Jesus as Lord.

The disciples were being human in their fear and anxiety, we are human too. Jesus challenged their faith because it seems that he wanted them and he wants us to know that we are not alone when we feel tossed about by the storms of life. When our natural inclination is to fight, flight (flee) or freeze, somewhere in the middle of those feelings and emotions there is faith. Faith that the God who sent Jesus to calm the storm for the disciples will be with us in our own storms and help us find calm, peace and understanding.

But we are involved in this journey of life, things are not done for us and we have to get to the other side step out with a leap of faith or a small step at a time. In some way my grandma did that every time she went out for a boat ride – she had to get through her fear before taking the first step off the sometimes shaky dock into the boat for the ride she so very much enjoyed! We are also called to step through our fear because of our faith as disciples of the God who is with us always. Amen.

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