

Sermon for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, 2020

Year A

Texts: 1 Kings 19:9-18, Romans 10:5-15, Matthew 14:22-33

The two-year old grandson of a friend of mine has a favorite word—and it's not the one that two-year olds are usually known for—the word "no." His favorite word is "again"—although his version is only one syllable—so whenever his "Mimaw" shows him how to do something new for the first time, or gives him a toy that needs a hands-on demo to explain how it works, or reads him a story that intrigues him, he'll say, "gain!" Even after 10 times, he'll ask for another round of "Itsy, bitsy spider," or "Row, row, row your boat." Psychologists tell us that there's a good reason for repetition as a child's mind develops: each time something is repeated, new information that wasn't absorbed the time before is ready to be taken in—and even more will be taken in the next time! It's part of the learning process that will extend all the way through our lifespans.

Repetition leads to knowledge, knowledge leads to growth, growth leads to understanding, and understanding leads to wisdom.

The Gospel writers might have been trying to do this for the early Church, because the story we hear in today's Gospel has the same four elements of a story that is repeated in Mark, Luke, and John: a boat facing strong winds on the Sea of Galilee; a storm that the wind has whipped up; frightened disciples; and the peaceful, powerful presence of Jesus, who is so at one with the created world that even the forces of nature yield to him.

The familiar image of a small fishing boat beset by wind and waves was a symbol that the early followers of Christ could easily identify with, and draw encouragement from, since, right from the very beginning, the way of love that Jesus taught, and lived, and died for, was often met by ridicule, and, as time went on, by persecution, and even death. After Christianity had spread from the Eastern Mediterranean to the furthest reaches of the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries, and especially after it became the official religion of the Empire in 325, the image of flimsy fishing vessel as a symbol of the Church somehow didn't seem appropriate any more, so the boat morphed into a large and powerful ship with a cruciform mast, in which all believers could find protection, safety and refuge. From the fourth century onward, this image of the Church as a ship can be seen in Christian art and architecture. Even today there's a bit of that imagery present in church buildings, as the part of the sanctuary in which the pews are located is called the "nave," which is a translation of the Latin word for ship. So when we gather for worship, we gather as a part of the beloved, 2000-year-old "ship" that is the Church.

Keeping that image in mind, I invite us to reflect on today's Gospel, not from the perspective of individual faith and spirituality, but from our collective and communal identity as Church. To help us do that, let's reimagine the scene that Matthew set up: the boat, instead of carrying individual disciples, is now the Church as a whole; the sea is not the Sea of Galilee but the sea of life; and the time frame is not the first century but the 21st. Given that reset, what, might the Gospel have to say to the "collective us" this morning?

Its first message might be that we are not in the boat of the Church by chance or happenstance. The first line of the Gospel text hints at that. If you recall, it says

that Jesus “made his disciples get into the boat.” A more accurate translation of the Greek word “made” is “compelled”—in the sense of doing something in response to a deep, inner, urging, like when Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, “Come, follow me.” We are the Church because God has called us, and we have a mission to be Christ in this world. Those beautiful feet that Paul talks about in his letter to the Romans this morning are ours. We are the Church, and we have Good News to share!

A second message that Matthew might have for us is to make sure that we notice where Jesus is during most of this story. Hint: it’s not “in” the boat! Jesus is right in the middle of the wind and waves, saying to the Church by his very presence there that *that’s* where we belong! That thought prompted me to reflect on the many national and global storms on the sea of life that have presented themselves just in the 21st century alone—starting with 9/11, just to get your own memory in gear—and how the Church, in its continuous evolution, is growing more and more into its identity as the beloved community that God has in mind for humanity. During this year, especially, I’m sensing that we as a Church are, indeed, where Jesus is calling us to be—outside of the boat and amidst the storms of the sea of life. Several examples immediately came to mind. One of them is what Monte Anderson and the Native American ministry team of St. Luke’s have been doing during the COVID crisis. Tirelessly, they have been gathering and delivering items of critical need to the White Mountain Apache Tribe, which has the highest number of COVID cases per capita of any tribe in Arizona. Monte’s most recent appeal, just a couple of weeks ago, resulted in a whole pickup truck full of supplies, and \$7,000 in cash donations from St. Luke’s parishioners, to help alleviate the ongoing suffering of our Native American sisters and brothers, which has been terribly exacerbated by the pandemic.

Another example is the strong stance in support of racial justice that the Episcopal Church has taken since the killing of George Floyd on May 25th. Here in our Diocese, in the aftermath of the awakening of our collective conscience, the Anti-Racism Committee is reviewing and revising our Anti-Racism statement, as well as re-working the anti-racism training that is not only required for all clergy prior to ordination but also will be available for congregations across the Diocese in the Fall.

Even before this year, the national Church has been a spiritual “shaker and mover” in responding to God’s call for us to work toward a world in which poverty, racism and war will be only a memory. To this end, a program called “Becoming Beloved Community” was unveiled in 2017, in response to a Resolution that was promulgated at the 2015 General Convention (Resolution C019). In a nutshell, it’s a vision of the leaders of our Church—and I quote here—“to respond to racial injustice and grow as a community of reconcilers, justice-makers, and healers” who share a passion for the dream of God.”¹ Just a couple of weeks ago, the national Church offered a compressed, 6-hour version of the program online, over a three day period—and over 1700 people “attended.” One component of this program is a 10-session film and reading series called “Sacred Ground,” which I am currently participating in, via Zoom, with 11 other deacons serving in the Diocese of Arizona. This is how the national Church’s website describes the course—and I quote: “This is a race dialogue series designed for these times. It is an attempt to be responsive to the profound challenges that currently exist in our society. It is focused on ...issues of race and racism, as well as the difficult but respectful and transformative dialogue we need to have with each other

¹ https://episcopalchurch.org/files/becoming_beloved_community_summary_0.pdf

about them. It invites participants to walk back through history in order to peel away the layers that brought us to today, and to do so in a personal way, reflecting on family histories and stories, as well as important narratives that shape the collective American story. It holds the vision of ‘beloved community’ as a guiding star—where all people are honored and protected and nurtured as beloved children of God, where we weep at one another’s pain and seek one another’s flourishing.”² I must say that the experience is making me understand what an earthquake feels like (in a good sense!)—and we still have seven sessions to go!

Yes, there are many storms assailing us now, individually, nationally, and globally, but our God—the One who says “Take one step toward me, I will take ten steps toward you; walk towards me, I will run towards you”—that God, the God of all, is with us.

“Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid.” Amen.

² <https://episcopalchurch.org/sacred-ground/invitation>

