

**Sunday, August 9, 2020**

**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**

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I am recording this homily one day before the funeral of Congressman John Lewis. I have spent the last few days reflecting on the day that I met him. Through the kindness of a dear friend and colleague, three of us traveled by train to Washington for this meeting that was life changing for each of us.

Now I focus on the task that is before me in this moment. Our gospel lesson is another story about the continuing revelation of God in Christ. I read about a crowd, a boat, and a moment of solitude on a mountain. Today's gospel actually speaks for itself. There is nothing deep or heavy going on here, right? The background to our text unfolds as follows.

Jesus receives the heart breaking news that John the Baptist has been killed at the direction of Herod Antipas. In response Jesus seeks to have some time away from others only to discover that a crowd is following Him. Rather than respond with annoyance Jesus is moved with compassion and ministers to the needs of those in the crowd.

As the evening approaches the disciples urge Jesus to send the people on their way to find food for themselves. This logical urging is met by a totally unexpected response as Jesus says to the twelve, "... you feed them." As you know the story unfolds and ends with the largest picnic one may ever hear of in a desolate place. Jesus does the unexpected – for a desert is not a place where we typically go to find food.

And now, to the twelve as we see the events described in today's lesson. The best definition that I have heard for the word disciple is given in the writings of Greg Ogden. Ogden writes that a disciple is *a lifelong learner seated at the feet of Jesus*.

In today's text Jesus is about to take his disciples on yet another journey with lessons. He will use a sea and a boat as the classroom. On the heels of this miraculous picnic in the desert, Jesus compels the disciples to go ahead of him to the other side. In this case the disciples actually obey. Jesus dismisses the crowd and seizes the moment for solitude and prayer.

As the story unfolds we read that the boat carrying the disciples is being battered by the waves since the winds were against them. The twelve are in the boat on the sea. Jesus, sometime between 3 and 6 a.m., meets them ON the water. Jesus says in response to the disciples fear-filled cries – **Take heart; It is I** (the divine name, spoken in present tense) **do not be afraid**. Looks like once again Jesus is doing the unexpected. The disciples no doubt knew that Jesus would be joining them – but walking – on the water – in the wee hours of the morning – in the midst of a storm?

We then read that Peter wants to join the Lord on the water. Jesus tells Peter to **Come** and Peter, now walking on the water, recognizes the strength of the winds and he begins to sink. He cries out and Jesus saves him. The scripture then says, *When they got into the boat, the winds ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him saying, Truly you are the Son of God.*

When we see God do the unimagined thing – it is not necessarily so that we too can do a gesture or imitate a moment. Please remember that faith is being cultivated when our ability to see is challenged. Opposition to our growth can result in deeper roots for the journey. Creativity is borne out of difficulty. A new and life changing revelation about God is can be made *when our backs are against the wall.*

The disciples' boat became a classroom. Neither Peter nor the disciples were in need of water-walking lessons. There is no indication that the disciples were even bothered by being tossed in this particular storm. They were only frightened when they did not recognize who was coming to join them.

So, here we are in a time of great upheaval. We see changes as well as challenges that we never could have guessed would unfold. Even as I mention these changes and challenges we are likely thinking of different things when we ponder them. But beloved let us not miss in the midst of the uncertainty and dissonance that we are not alone. God keeps showing up in unexpected ways. Our role is to take heart, to remain faithful.

God is no less God today than when we last knelt together to partake of the bread and cup. God is no less God than when we sang our last hymn together. God is no less God than when we passed the “peace” and now some of us may even find ourselves missing that experience as we lean into social distancing in hopes of being well.

Now, let's go back to that day in September 2018 when I was in the office of Congressman John Lewis. Lewis' staffers invited us into his office to wait for him. June Weltner Lehman, the daughter of former Congressman Charles Weltner made this meeting possible. June's Dad held John Lewis' seat in the 1960's. Once Congressman Lewis arrived we listened as he shared his admiration for Congressman Weltner with June. Congressman Weltner had been among those who supported integration. His office in Georgia was bombed because he supported MLK and the Civil Rights Movement. Lewis asked June about her Mom and the family. It was a special moment to observe.

I then asked Congressman Lewis about the impact and timing of the Birmingham church bombing. You see that incident occurred less than one month after the March on Washington. The bombing was obviously designed to break the spirit of the Movement.

With tears in his eyes Lewis recounted the events that surrounded that September day in 1963. He concluded that when all was said and done he knew and Dr. King knew more than ever before that *quitting was not an option.*

As our conversation was ended, Lewis encouraged the three of us to keep teaching. He said that he was optimistic about the future because of teachers and young people in our country. His countenance changed and he became more animated as he shared optimistic and encouraging words. We left his office after exceeding our scheduled time. He thanked us for coming.

Beloved, it is difficult to see what lies ahead. But after spending time with one who kept on going anyway, I was reminded that God is often nearer than we think. I remembered that my parents taught me to look for God whenever I am unsure.

Currently it seems as though chaos is seeking to become our new normal. We have entered into this season in chaos – but we need not abandon ship. Our gospel lesson closes as Jesus and Peter entered the boat together – the winds ceased and the disciples worshiped.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, *We may have all come in different ships but we're all in the same boat now.* In this season of chaos, uncertainty, anger, confusion, we need not abandon ship. Let us follow the example that unfolds in today's lesson. Let us move ahead, even in the storm, and emerge from this season in worship. After all, *quitting is not an option.*