

August 13, 2017
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

“We’re All in the Same Boat”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Romans 10:5-15 ~ Matthew 14:22-33

Have you ever noticed that it’s often in the most challenging times of life that we sense God’s presence most clearly? I’m not saying it *should* be this way. Or that God *only* appears when we most need God. Rather, I think that there’s just something about significant challenges and trials that clarify our priorities and cut through the manifold distractions of everyday life so that we may see God more clearly.

I think that’s part of what’s going on in today’s Gospel reading. After feeding the thousands who followed him into the wilderness, Jesus commands the disciples to head across the sea without him while he remains on shore to send the crowds on their way ... and then spend some time in communion with his Father on the mountain. While the disciples are crossing, a storm arises that threatens to engulf them. They spend the better part of an anxious night navigating the waves, and in the early hours of the morning Jesus strides across the water to meet them.

Mistaking Jesus for a wave-walking spirit, the disciples grow even more alarmed as he draws near. In response, Jesus reassures them that it is he who is coming to them. His encouragement works...and then some ... as Peter is emboldened to ask if he might join Jesus out on the water. At first confident given his Lord’s assent, Peter soon remembers the height of the waves and depth of the sea and loses heart ... whereupon Jesus reaches out and grabs him. While Jesus remarks on his lack of faith, it’s at this moment that the disciples see Jesus as if for the first time, confessing, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Which is interesting, when you think about it. I mean, Jesus had just fed thousands upon thousands of helpless and vulnerable people, revealing both divine power and divine compassion. And yet it’s here ... at this moment of extremity ... when the disciples perceive most clearly who Jesus is.

So, part of what strikes me in this passage is how it reveals something deeply true about humanity. I know, at least, that I have often overlooked God’s presence in the peaceful and pleasant portions of my life ... yet called out in earnest when things took a difficult turn.

I’m not totally sure why this is, but I think part of it is that we spend a fair amount of our time and energy trying to establish a stable, safe, and secure life ... both for us and those we love. There’s nothing wrong with that on one level. From the beginning God desires that we flourish ... and stability promotes growth. But all too often we note our modest success ... and assume we no longer need God ... or at least forget how much a part of our lives God *is* and desires *to be*. Or perhaps we confuse safety and stability with abundant life. Either way, we may forget how much we depend on God. Until tragedy strikes in the form of illness or job loss ... or the end of a relationship ... or some grave mistake we’ve made ... and suddenly our ongoing need for God becomes painfully clear.

But this story doesn’t only tell us about ourselves ... it also tells us about God. This in two ways. First, no matter what it is that reminds us of our need for God ... still God responds. Just as Jesus reassures the disciples and reaches out to grab hold of Peter ... so also God responds to us with compassion and support. Second, and I’d argue more importantly, God not only responds to our need, but actually desires

that we seek to live lives of abundance and courage. Notice that Jesus actually commanded the disciples to cross the sea to go ahead of him, trusting them to navigate both sea and storm.

I'm struck by Jesus' three-fold response to the disciples. First, he urges them to "take heart." Second, he reveals his presence with ... among ... and for them. For while we translate what Jesus utters as "It is I," ... the Greek is more sparse, succinct, and significant: "I Am." I suspect that neither the disciples nor Matthew's audience would mistake the pronouncement of the divine name. Third, having revealed his presence and identity, Jesus then encourages the disciples once more to leave fear behind and live what Brené Brown calls "whole-hearted" lives.

And I think this is *still* God's desire for us. God desires, that is, that we trust that God is with us and for us ... and thereby live with courage and hope ... taking chances ... risking ourselves in relationship ... seeking the welfare of the individuals and community around us ... all the while remembering that even when we overlook God's presence, God is always there ... sometimes to encourage us to overcome our fears ... sometimes sending us out ahead ... and sometimes reaching out to grab hold of us in forgiveness, mercy, comfort, and grace.

This story is loaded with symbolism. In Matthew's day, the boat was a symbol for the church. The church was like Noah's ark, a people saved by passing through the waters. The church was like the disciple's boat, fishing for people. The church was the safe place that God provided in the storms of life ... and those early Christians passed through some turbulent times ... not only the normal human woes but persecution and pressure as a community because they were out of step with the religious majority of their day. Go into many ancient church buildings and look up at the vaulted ceiling. It looks like a boat turned upside down. Jesus appears "early in the morning" in Matthew's story ... just as he appears "early in the morning of the first day" when he rises from the dead. In fact, the story has several features we usually find in the stories of Jesus' appearances after the resurrection. I think for Matthew this story was about the church as a boat in the storm where the risen Christ comes to us ... where Jesus stills the storm and we worship ... realizing in holy amazement: "Truly you are the Son of God!"

As I studied this text part of me wanted to preach that old classic line, "You can't walk on water if you won't get out of the boat." Because it *is* about taking risks ... braving the storm ... following Jesus' lead. But another part of me wanted to preach about the staying in the boat where Jesus will come to you. Yes, the church is a leaky boat, battered by the wind and waves. But it's the safe place God has given us to huddle together ... and Jesus will find us here and save us ... a people who have passed through the waters.

Funny thing about this leaky old boat called First Congregational UCC – Eagle River. It's not perfect. Sometimes we miss each other in times of need. Sometimes we hurt each other's feelings ... and sometimes the boat feels a little too crowded even though we've lots of space for more. Sometimes even though we work hard through the long night, it seems we make little headway ... little progress towards where we would like to go. Sometimes we can't see that Jesus is with us ... we can't believe it's him when he shows up in ways we hadn't expected ... and we wonder if Jesus will find us here in the middle of the ocean in the middle of whatever storm we may be passing through. But the love of God's people helps Jesus find us no matter where we are, if we're with them. We're all in the same boat! So, I want to say, stay in the boat God has given us. Stay in the church even when it disappoints or hurts or angers you. Stay and help us make it a better boat. But stay, because it's a lifeboat. It's a lifeboat! And he is here with us today, now, early in the morning of the first day.

But I just can't resist the temptation to remind you that this story is *also* about faith as risk and courage. Sometimes I think we are so busy cowering in fear in the middle of our storm, that we are afraid to risk

stepping out in faith when Jesus says, "Come on." I saw a surprising sight driving on I-39 the other day. I was passed by one of the most beautiful tractor rigs I've ever seen. This one was beautiful and powerful and huge, complete with a sleeper cab and metallic paint and fancy running lights. He passed me, this mighty tractor, and he was pulling a tiny U-Haul trailer ... the kind you might see behind a Honda Civic. It occurred to me that I had just witnessed God's visual aid for the church. That is the church isn't it? I mean, Jesus with us, leading the way, powerfully pulling us along ... all we have to do is stay connected! So why do we worry about resources and resistance and what others might think? We ought to be pulling the world along behind us into spiritual health ... into God's peace. I don't just mean our church ... but the church in the world. I believe if it would follow the risen Christ, the church in the world could feed all the hungry and house all the homeless and confront the powers that create materialism and division and poverty and strife. But sadly no, that's not the case. And do you know why? Because, like Peter, we are afraid.

We have come to a new beginning today. Of course, every Sunday is a new beginning in the church, Easter Sunday, the first day of a new creation ... for each of us ... for all of us. Christ in us is the power to begin again ... to hope when we had given up hope ... to live when we fear death. We have just started a process to discern our new vision as a church for years to come. Could this be the time God has chosen for us to be spiritually renewed as a people? Sure, the winds are blowing and the waves are strong. The winds of war are winding through the world. The waves of materialism and cynicism rock the church this way ... and the waves of fundamentalism rock the church that way ... and it seems we make no headway at all. But here comes somebody calling us to meet him out on the water. Is it a ghost? Is it a demon? Is it a hallucination? Is it a myth? Or is that who I think it is? Do you see him, too? Maybe it's time we got our feet wet.

May we pray?

Be with us here, Lord, as we worship today. Be with us here as we seek to be your church. You have given us each other for safety and for care. You have given us a boat in the storm and a good place to fish. Give us the vision to see you on the water with us and the courage to answer your call. Amen.