

Morning Prayer, August 13, 2017

Don't Look Down

I remember when my father taught me how to ride a two-wheeler bicycle. He ran next to me as I pedaled, holding onto the seat and telling me that he wouldn't let go. I zipped along filled with confidence until the moment when I looked back and saw my dad way behind me, standing still and watching me, waving. And as soon as I realized that I was riding on my own, I fell down.

As grateful as I was that I could now ride a bike, I was actually kind of ticked at my dad. In essence, he had lied to me, reassuring me that he wouldn't let go and what had he done? He let go! I could have died! I thought my dad acted like a real jerk.

So here's today's gospel reading, where not only do we see one of the New Testament's iconic miracles, Jesus walking on water, but we also see Peter leaping in to follow the master. Morgan Guyton, a Methodist chaplain at Tulane University thinks that, like my dad, Jesus can also be a real jerk sometimes. But that's ok. He says that recognizing the times when Jesus acts in a way that isn't perfectly sweet and domesticated calls on us to trust him even more. He writes "It's very easy to let your eyes glaze over when you're looking at the story for the hundredth time. But there's something about the text that bothered me reading it through this time and I'm not sure that it isn't supposed to bother me. Peter has jumped out of the boat and done something that required way more faith than I would ever be able to muster: walking across the water to Jesus. And when he starts to sink, Jesus pings on him; 'Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?' Little faith? A man who has just walked on water for the first time? Really, Jesus?"

He continues, "I think that Jesus messed with his disciples and messes with us readers by saying things that should make us uncomfortable to see if we're going to have the guts to talk back to him." Pretending that Jesus always makes perfect sense, he thinks, is a way of dismissing him because if we have him all figured out, we don't need to change anything about ourselves.

Mr Guyton concludes, "I don't know why Jesus didn't say to Peter 'Wow, that's pretty darn good for your first time walking on water.' Maybe it was arrogant of Peter to have to be the super-disciple who jumped out of the boat when everyone else was scared, and Jesus felt he needed a little bit of ribbing to put him back in his place. He was probably laughing or winking when he said it." And his concluding question is, do we trust Jesus enough to admit that he doesn't always make sense? Do we trust enough even when the wind is against us?

Sometimes this gospel is trotted out to tell us that we should have more trust, more faith. That having the right kind of faith, a deeper, truer faith, will enable us- you and me- to walk on water. But Peter couldn't and neither can we. Sometimes the wind is just against us.

Sid Batts is the senior pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Greensboro North Carolina, and he reminds us “ this story is only partially about Peter and his failure of faith but that it is totally about the Jesus who reached out his hand and kept Peter from sinking. That it’s not up to us to walk on water. It’s up to us to remember how the story starts: ‘Immediately Jesus made the disciples (that’s us) get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side.’ Because there will be a storm,” he says, “one hundred percent chance, and when we are in the middle of it, Jesus will come out to meet us.” It’s just that sometimes we don’t recognize him.

I hate that. As Ann Lamott once said, “I would much prefer that God have a magic wand and not just a raggedy love-army of helpers. Mr Rogers’ mother told him when he was a boy to ‘look to the helpers’. That’s the secret of life.” When the wind is against us, look to the helpers.

The helpers are all those people who sometimes don’t look much like Jesus but they are everywhere waiting to help us. Sometimes they appear in the fog of a storm, like the ghost the disciples thought that they were seeing. And sometimes you have to be brave and go out and look for them.

Reverend Batts is obviously a baseball fan and in his sermon he remembered Jackie Robinson and his teammate, PeeWee Reese. In 1947, the Dodgers’ first series in Cincinnati had a particularly antagonistic crowd. During the first game, amid unrelenting jeers and insults aimed at Robinson, Reese had finally had enough. During the middle of the game, he called a time out, walked over to Robinson, put his arm around his shoulder and casually talked to him. What happened? The crowd sat in stunned silence. They got the message.

When the wind is against us, look for the helpers.

Sure, it feels like Jesus can be a jerk sometimes. We can feel like we are doing our best, trying to walk on the water to reach him and when we inevitably fail, it can feel like he’s not listening. But the important thing, the takeaway from the story, isn’t that Peter tried and failed. The important part is that Jesus put them all into the boat in the first place.

We all have our storms, we all have times when the wind is against us and we feel like we can’t go on. We wonder where God is, where Jesus is. Reverend Batts concludes by telling us to just “get into the boat. The wind will often be against us. There will be a storm.

Jesus will come. We will not die. And we are to remember these three things in a storm: First, it’s not a referendum on your faith. Let me repeat that one. It is NOT a referendum on your faith. Secondly, look for Jesus and his helpers. And finally, remember that sometimes those helpers will be you and me.

Amen.

