

It Starts By Getting In the Boat

An initial response to the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, VA

Matthew 14:22-33
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Last Sunday I opened the sermon by asking, "What is progressive Christianity?" I then referred to a fairly comprehensive list of bullet points found in our church brochure. **Have you ever wondered why I never refer to progressive Christianity as liberal Christianity? That's because they are not the same thing.** Many think the word 'liberal,' which had become such a pejorative term among conservatives and evangelicals, was simply replaced with the word 'progressive,' much as it has in politics.

That's not the case. **Liberal Christianity**, also known as **liberal theology**, began in the late 18th century. It developed and grew as a consequence of the Enlightenment. Springing initially as a response to modern philosophy and the scientific revolution, it involved a range of ideas centered on reason, verifiable fact, and experience as the primary source of revelation, authority and legitimacy. Liberal Christianity is based in what is called **modernism**, without preconceived notions of the authority of scripture or the correctness of Church dogma. To understand liberal theology, British theologian, Steve Holmes, wrote in 2012, "...the idea that attentiveness and fidelity to human religious experience is more determinative than attentiveness and fidelity to Scripture or church tradition [is the place to start]."

Beginning in the middle of the 20th century, we moved into what is called the **post-modern era**. And with it, liberal Christianity birthed a similar yet different way of doing theology and biblical interpretation, now called **progressive Christianity**. All of this is way too complex to summarize, let alone explain, in a few-minutes introduction to a sermon, but let me give you just one example of the difference in biblical interpretation using this morning's text from Matthew 14, the story of Jesus, and briefly Peter, walking on water.

Guided strictly by reason, liberal Christianity (and yes, this is a generalization) tried to find ways to explain miracle stories in the gospels by coming up with other rational explanations of what was presented as supernatural. Jesus, for instance, could have simply been walking on a sand bar or on rocks beneath the water, not on water itself. Or as in other stories, Jesus was walking "by" the sea, like on the seashore, instead of "on" the sea.

Progressive Christianity, on the other hand, does not try to explain away the supernatural, but simply accepts that biblical authors intended to reveal important truths through the use of miracle stories. So, **instead of looking for a logical or rational explanation, or like traditional Christianity simply accepting miracle stories on face value, progressive Christianity seeks to look at these stories through the lens of metaphorical language, not literal language.** Again, the difference with both liberal and traditional Christianity is that **progressives believe biblical authors most likely never intended for the stories to be taken as literal, historical fact.** We lost that over the ages.

So, how do we interpret Jesus walking on the water as a metaphor? Not surprisingly, this particular story, along with many others in scripture, is embedded with very rich and dynamic symbolism associated with the sea and the boat that sails upon it. Those in Matthew's community of faith were well aware of the metaphorical imagery in this story.

Let's start with **the sea**. In both Old and New Testament times the sea was a very common metaphor that represented **a dangerous, unpredictable, and chaotic place**. Looking at what's going on today in our country and in the world, we could describe the mayhem using this same metaphor. Going all the way back to the first chapter in Genesis we learn that the waters of the sea symbolize the forces of chaos in the universe. **In the creation story, we learn that it is God who brings order out of that chaos.**

To extend the metaphor further in today's Gospel story, Matthew introduces **a boat** sailing upon the sea. Surviving a trip across the sea was determined by the strength and nature of one's boat, and by the courage of those sailing the boat. And as revealed in this story, it was particularly determined by recognizing God's Sacred Presence with them as they sailed on that sea of chaos. This story, then, can be understood, and basically interpreted as a parable. Since the earliest days of Christianity, **a boat has stood as a common symbol to represent the Church**. Those people in the boat represent Christians. As discussed during this morning's Time With the Children, that's what the boat in our own stained glass window represents. In the boat named College Hill, those people are you and me.

Like in the days of the early church, the church today faces its own rough seas and chaos in the world. In just one example, for instance, how does the church today respond to continued issues of **racism**, like the demonstrations this past Friday night in **Charlottesville, Virginia**, which rolled into and escalated on Saturday. As the New York Times reported yesterday, "Late Friday night, several hundred torch-bearing men and women marched on the main quadrangle of the University of Virginia's grounds, shouting, "You will not replace us," and "Jew will not replace us." They walked around the Rotunda, the university's signature building, and to a statue of Robert E. Lee [scheduled to be taken down], where a group of counter-protesters were gathered, and a brawl ensued."

Yesterday, these white nationalists gathered in a "**Unite the Right**" rally, often called the alt-right. It was declared an "unlawful assembly," leading the Virginia governor to call a state of emergency to deal with the impending violence. There was violence, including a 20-year-old white supremacist plowing his car into a crowd of counter-demonstrators, killing one and injuring many others. Some believe that giving white supremacists our attention is just what they want, so we should ignore them altogether. Since there has been such a jarring rise in overt racist rhetoric and actions over the past year, however, most believe that such bigotry must be met head on and named for the racism it is. That's why **President Trump immediately faced backlash from politicians in both parties for failing yesterday to call out and condemn white nationalism and supremacy groups by name. Perhaps he is afraid of the backlash from the white nationalists themselves who supported his candidacy with Trump's pledge to "take America back."** We'll see how this unfolds.

Facebook was filled with such calls to action yesterday. A very dear seminary friend of mine, the Rev. Erika Funk, posted, "Pay attention to Charlottesville because it isn't about Charlottesville. It's about America and who we want to be. **An evil has been**

unleashed, the evil of hate and fear mongering and superiority. Goodness will win in the end but **we have to do our part.** Pay attention."

I was pleased to read that the counter-demonstrators were being organized and led, in part, by a group of progressive and inclusive clergy. I would have been among them if I could. It shows that **we are indeed sailing in a small boat on a very rough sea of chaos.** Staying with the metaphor of the boat representing the Church, it's not hard to see ourselves in that boat.

How do we deal with issues such as this? **What if we simply ignore it? Well, that would basically be saying we don't want to get into the boat in the first place. So, we have a choice. Or do we, as faithful followers of the ways and teachings of Jesus?**

A couple of thoughts. Beyond any literal meaning of Jesus walking on the water to save his disciples – as in defying the laws of gravity and physics – this story *always* carried the metaphorical meaning that Jesus, who obviously represents the Presence of God in this story and throughout the gospels, overcomes the power of chaos – just as God had done at the beginning of creation. A traditional understanding of this story reveals that God, in Christ, will ultimately prevail against anything that might try to destroy the Church and Christianity itself.

When it comes to a faithful interpretation of this story, it's also very important to note how it begins. We're told, "**Jesus made the disciples get into the boat** and go on ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee" (vs. 22). The disciples were simply being obedient and faithful in following the instructions that Jesus gave them. It was Jesus who sent them out onto sea. Therefore, the difficulties they experience on the sea are not of their own making, but stem from their compliance with Jesus' command to venture forth. So I ask, how often do we conclude that any difficulty or storm that we face in life is sometimes the result of *our* own making, that it's somehow our fault? Yes, **sometimes those storms may be part of the consequences of our own actions. But oftentimes, encountering storms are just a part of life, for chaos has not yet been completely abolished.**

Remember, **it is God who sends us out in mission and ministry onto an often-dangerous sea**, which is indeed a big part of world around us. I find it disheartening, then, that so many folks have chosen to abandon the church, or Christianity altogether, rather than to ride out the storm within the context of a supportive and empowering community of faith – such as this one – until the seas are calmer.

We need the courage to stay engaged in the ministry of the church even when the seas are rough, perhaps even threatening. And just as Jesus did not leave his disciples to fend for themselves in their hour of need, **God doesn't abandon us to fend for ourselves** either, in whatever storms in life are threatening us. We, too, like the disciples, need to hear deep within our hearts, minds and spirits the same words of Jesus, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

It all starts, however, with getting into the boat in the first place and heading out to sea. We sail together to face the chaos around us, knowing God is present with us.

Amen.

Resources:

Feasting on the Gospels

Wikipedia: *Liberal Christianity, Enlightenment*

New York Times, White Nationalists March on University of Virginia, Aug. 11, 2017.