

Get In the Boat / Get Out of the Boat

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

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August 13, 2023

The words liberal and progressive are almost interchangeable in today's usage. And since the word "**liberal**" became such a pejorative term with negative connotations among conservatives and evangelicals, in most cases it was simply replaced with the word "**progressive**," much as it has in relationship to politics. Substituting one for the other is not the case, however, when it comes to their meaning in the study of theology and biblical interpretation. For instance, most of us strongly lean toward progressive biblical interpretation, which originated from, but then took a divergent path from what is termed liberal biblical interpretation. Let me explain.

As a formally recognized category, **Liberal Christianity**, also known as liberal theology, began in the late 18th century. It developed and grew as a consequence of the Enlightenment, particularly in Germany. Originating 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 orthodox church dogma or tradition.

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**. For instance, guided primarily by reason and experience, **a liberal theological approach looks for ways to explain miracle stories by coming up with rational explanations of what is presented as supernatural**.

Today's 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 provides a good example. From a liberal perspective, as a way of explanation, Jesus could have simply been walking on a sand bar or on rocks beneath the water, not miraculously on water itself. Or as in other similar stories, Jesus was walking "by" the sea, like on the seashore, instead of literally "on" the water itself.

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. Therefore, 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 likely never intended for the stories to be taken as literal, historical fact in the first place**. We have lost that over the ages.

So, then, 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 place of chaos, danger, and unpredictability**. Going all the way back to the first chapter in Genesis 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. Since the earliest days of Christianity, a boat stood as a **common symbol to represent the Christian Church. The people in the boat represent those in Christian communities of faith**. 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 include you and me.

In the historical context of Matthew's community of faith, the rough sea referred to the hardship and conflict that battered the early Christian church as it faced rejection from Judaism and persecution from the Roman Empire. Therefore, this was a story of comfort and assurance that even though Jesus himself wasn't with the disciples in the boat, reflecting the fact that Jesus was no longer physically present among them, the Spirit of Christ – God – was with them all along.

The church today faces its own rough seas of chaos, as well as forces that threaten the goodness of life and the created order in the world. It's no surprise, then, that we often feel that we ourselves are sailing in a small boat on very rough seas of chaos.

Jesus, of course, plays the most important role in this story. Beyond any literal meaning of Jesus walking on the water to save his disciples – as in defying the laws of physics and gravity – **this story always carried the metaphorical meaning that Jesus, by representing the Presence of God in this story and throughout the gospels, can overcome the powers of chaos** – just as God had done at the beginning of creation.

And when it comes to a faithful interpretation of this story, it's very important to note how it begins. We're told that, "**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 – to get into the boat and set sail**. This teaches us we shouldn't be surprised that when following God's directive to venture forth in life and ministry, that **the sea of life we travel upon can also become chaotic and unpredictable**. Yes, it is God who sends us out in mission and ministry onto an often-threatening sea, which is the world all around us. And just as Jesus did not leave his disciples to fend for themselves in their hour of need, God does not leave us to fend for ourselves either. We, too, like the disciples, need to hear deep within our hearts and minds those same words of Jesus, "**Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid**." Let us not be too afraid, therefore, to get into the boat in the first place, meaning to have the courage to stay engaged in the ministries Jesus began.

Once we get in the boat and find ourselves on rough seas, what's next? You may have noticed I added to the title of this sermon after "**Get In the Boat**", "**Get Out of the Boat**." That doesn't mean I'm encouraging folks to abandon ship and leave the church. In fact, **it's quite disheartening that so many have chosen to abandon the**

church altogether, though not necessarily God, rather than to ride out the storm within the context of a supportive and empowering community of faith – such as this one.

There is, of course, another important element to this story, and that's **Peter**. He responds to Jesus' comment to not be afraid by asking permission to come to Jesus on the sea. Interestingly, Peter does not impetuously leap out of the boat. Rather, he waits until he hears the command from Jesus: "Come" (Matt. 14:28-19). **It is Jesus who calls Peter forth.** And for a brief time Peter, like Jesus, is able to walk on the rough sea. It is in this instant that **we catch a brief glimpse of what Matthew believes discipleship is all about – obeying Jesus and moving toward him confidently even in the midst of threatening and unpredictable chaos.** But Peter, we're told, cannot maintain his posture. He catches sight of the wind, and now there are two biblical powers symbolically in view: God and chaos.

Peter's faith is now mixed with fear and, wondering whether Jesus or the raging wind will finally prevail, he begins to sink into the sea. Matthew wants his readers to know that **even when disciples falter, and that includes each one of us, God continues to be present.** Jesus rescues Peter, and us, from chaos. In our own journey, like Peter, **we are people of faith caught midway between certainty and doubt, between courage and anxiety, between peace and fear. Yet Peter, rather than representing some kind of failure, represents the risk-taking element of faith by getting out of the relative safety of the boat – out of the familiarity and security of the confines of the church.**

We, too, are called to come out of the boat, to take risks, even when the outcome isn't certain. Peter may have faltered, but he didn't drown. Reflect upon the risks you have taken in your life by stepping out in faith. This congregation has taken risks, time and time again, as it has **stepped out of the boat in faith to bear witness to God's inclusive love and acceptance** within this broader community, this presbytery, and beyond. As we have experienced, that may often involve challenging the status quo in both church and society, never a particularly safe space.

One quick final point. Unlike some misguided interpretations of this biblical story, the message is not that Peter *would* have been able to walk on the sea if he only had *enough* faith. Likewise, the message to us is not: If we only had enough faith we could overcome all the chaos in our lives in spectacular and miraculous ways. **This story suffers a great disservice if it is simply used as a device for the erroneous platitude that "if we just keep our eyes fixed on Jesus then we won't ever falter."** **The life of faith is not that simplistic.** Faith is not being able to miraculously walk on water – only God can do that. Rather, **faith is daring to believe, in the face of all the evidence to the contrary, that God is with and within us both in the boat and out of the boat.**

Amen.

Resources:

Feasting on the Gospels

Wikipedia: *Liberal Christianity; Enlightenment*

Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, pg. 329-330.*