

Sermon: **The Life of Faith**

Text: Matthew 14:22-33

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Harpswell, Maine
Delivered: August 10, 2008

Early this past Monday morning I sat in the living room with a bible in one hand and a cup of strong, black coffee in the other, thinking about this morning's gospel lesson. As is too often the practice of preachers, I prematurely began to ask, "How do I preach this? What shall I say this coming Sunday? Jesus walked on water; go and do thou likewise? Peter walked on water with limited success; should we at least try? If so, how much faith does it take to walk on water?"

All that aside and with more serious consideration, I began wondering what this account must have meant to Matthew's original audience, that young struggling church.

The story of Jesus feeding the multitude of 5000 plus with 5 loaves and 2 fish (last Sunday's gospel lesson) must have been a tremendous encouragement to that early church living in the face of perpetual need, yet finding again and again that as they offered themselves to God in worship and trust just as they were, with what they had, that God was able to accomplish through them what they could never have done on their own.

Just so, this story must have been a tremendous encouragement to that early church living in a very difficult time of struggle. I'm sure that they could readily identify with this crew of struggling disciples trying to make headway against the winds of adversity. It was not smooth sailing for the early church. What must this story have meant to them then?

With a second cup of strong, black coffee, I began to asking, "What does this story mean to me? What might it mean to us, the church in our day?" It got me to thinking about the whole issue of faith.

What we have in this story is something more than an incident, as spectacular as it may be, in the life of Jesus, or an incident, spectacular as it may be, in the life of Peter. It is a picture of a whole life of faith... the pattern of a continuing way of living in faith.

Our lives are not simply a series of unrelated incidents or simply the consequence of independent situations or external circumstances that keep happening to us. Rather our lives are more ultimately the result of how we relate and respond to all these incidents, situations and circumstances, and how, in the midst of them, we relate to God and others. That becomes a larger pattern of life that shapes how we think about God, and who we are, and the entire direction of our lives.

So it is with faith. I'd like to suggest two essential attributes of faith.

First, faith is relational. It is trust *in God*.

"Faith" is a word that is too often bandied about as though it were some kind of external, quantitative thing; some substance or commodity; as though it were something we trade on, depending on how much of "it" we have; like a spiritual steroid; a spiritual performance enhancing substance. You get enough of this stuff working for you and you'll be able to move mountains to get what you want and become everything you've wanted to be... if you just have enough of this stuff called faith. Some TV preachers present it like an infomercial. Faith is a batch of problem solving stuff they can package and mail to you for \$19.95 plus shipping and handling. If you want to go for that sort of pitch, I'd suggest you watch out for the shipping and handling.

Rather, faith in God is exactly... faith *in God*. It's trust in the one whom we have come to believe in and know to be absolutely and supremely trustworthy; the one who loves us without reservation or condition; the one who only ever has our best at heart and who knows better than we what *is* best for us.

Our faith is all about who God is in relation to us and who we are in relation to God. Faith is a trust relationship; a relationship of trust.

Secondly, **faith is responsive.**

What we call steps of faith, exercising our faith, ventures of faith are all actions in response to this One we trust.

So then, in all of this, we focus as best we can on what God is showing us of himself, the teaching and life-example of Jesus, and we seek to be sensitive to the Spirit's leading, and we respond accordingly to God. The last thing we want to do is to step out on our own initiative, in our own direction, going after what we have decided we want, and then call it *faith*.

From the get-go it was called *following*. Jesus' first words to his disciples were "follow me, and I will make you to become..." To be disciple is to learn the ways of Christ and to follow in his ways. It's relational and it's responsive.

German theologian, Emil Brunner, defined faith as "Our response to the address of God." That's relational and that's responsive.

Relating and responding to God in faith may be difficult, daring and sometimes scary. But a life of faith is a life lived in relation to God and in response to God.

After that second cup of coffee, (I didn't have a third.) I began to notice that there is a lot of this relational and responsive stuff going on in this story as Matthew tells it. It becomes a perfect allegory of the life of faith.

These disciples of Jesus were in a dangerous situation. They were out there alone in the middle of the lake, far from shore. The wind had kicked up against them and the waves were battering their boat. We might ask what they were they doing out there in the first place. Was this something like the chicken crossing the road just to get to the other side, or the bear that went over the mountain just to see what he could see? The disciples may not have known what to expect when they got to the other side, but let's understand that they had good reason to be out there. Jesus, about to dismiss the crowds and go up into a mountain by himself to pray, had instructed the disciples to "get into the boat" and to "go on ahead to the other side". They had put in and set out in relationship and in response to their Lord's directive. So they were out there in adversity but not on their own.

The church has struggled against untold adversities, and down through the years she has buried her martyrs. But always, and now, when we are venturing in faith at our Lord's directive we may be assured of his good will and purpose in our venture.

Again and again by his Spirit God comes to us in surprising ways. Matthew says, "Early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea." More important than Jesus walking on water is that he came walking toward them. He comes to us in ways unknown to us; in ways that are beyond us; in ways that surprise us. Whether he walked on water or flew through the air, he made his way to his disciples in his own way, as only he could. Then he made himself known to them by speaking to their fear and confusion. "Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid."

This is all very relational. He makes his way to them, to be present with them, there in their midst. He speaks in a familiar voice, saying "It is I". They know that voice, and over the crash of the waves and the whirl of the wind, they can hear his still, small voice. And in response, their fears are relieved.

Then there's Peter; good old Peter. You gotta' love Peter; impulsive, impetuous Peter. We have the story of Peter walking on water but, as we said, only with limited success. But this is not crazy Peter being impulsive and doing a foolish thing. Let me continue to press this idea of faith being relational and responsive.

Before leaving the boat Peter said to Jesus, "If it is you, command me to come to you on the water." The condition clause, "if it is you" might well be translated, "since it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Again, more important that Peter walking on water is that Peter, only at the directive of Jesus, is making his way to Jesus even as Jesus had made his way to Peter. That's relational faith. That's responsive faith. And that's something entirely different than Peter stepping off on his own attempt to do his own thing.

When Peter got out of the boat and started to walk toward Jesus it was a venture of faith indeed. But that faith was inspired by what he saw in Jesus and what he had come to know

Jesus to be. Peter was smart enough not to try this on his own; not by his own will but only by the will of the Lord; at the directive of God. Jesus said, "Come." When Peter crawled out of his vessel of safety and security and put his foot to water he was responding to the one whom he had come to believe in and knew to be absolutely and supremely trustworthy; the one who loved him without reservation or condition; the one who only ever had Peter's best at heart and who knew better than Peter what was best for him. He was responding to Jesus' invitation.

So far so good. Then Peter noticed something. The strong wind was still blowing. Jesus hadn't stilled the wind like he had on another occasion. Jesus didn't fix all the problems or eliminate the difficult circumstances. The wind was still strong against Peter and he could feel it in his face and feel it pushing him around. Peter started relating and responding to the situation; the surrounding circumstances; and all the external conditions. And he started to sink.

In the walk of faith we too experience our ups and downs. Sometimes we feel like we're walking on water and sometimes we're sure we're sinking.

Peter cried out, "Lord, save me!" As the hymn writer says, "Jesus knows our every weakness." He knew Peter and loved Peter. He reached out his hand and caught Peter. Does that ever give meaning to our expression "outreach". That's relational and responsive. Jesus relates and responds to our weakness and doubts.

When we come to the conclusion of the story they're all back together in the boat. Then the wind ceased. We might ask, "Why so late, Lord?" If Jesus could walk on water, he could have simply spoken the word back there on the mountain and the wind would have ceased right then. I'd vote for that. But my experience and yours tell us that the life of faith isn't like that.

I conclude. Our faith in God is not some kind of commodity we use in trade with God for blessings or to get our problems fixed. It is a relational and responsive way of living in trust with God. It ultimately results in worship and in acclamation of who God is. And that's exactly how the story concludes. Matthew says, "Those in the boat worshipped him". The word worship here means to prostrate oneself; to bow down in worship. They worshipped him, saying "Truly you are the Son of God." Their response to all they had seen and had come to know of Jesus was to bow down in worship acclaiming him to be the Son of God. It was not their own declaration; it was an acclamation in response to what they had come to see and know of Jesus.

The life of faith is a life of worship, and worship is relational and responsive. God comes to us through Christ by the Holy Spirit, into our circumstances, making himself known, inspiring our trust and calling us to come to him; reaching out to us in our distress, and ultimately drawing us to himself in worship and the acclamation of his Lordship.

The story never quite ends. It leaves us out there in the world. We're still out there on the sea, living the life of faith in relation to God and in response to God. The faith walk is not a cake walk, but it's the only way to really live.

Amen.