

IN THE BOAT WITH JESUS
Matthew 14:22-33

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
16 August 2020
(online worship only)

I want to show you a picture of one of my mentors, Fred Craddock. He was a renowned preaching professor, preacher, New Testament scholar and a family friend. He was also one of the most simple and humble people I've ever met. It was a great thrill for me when he accepted our invitation to preach here in this sanctuary during our first year of worship in this space, just a few years before he died. I spent quite a bit of time with him that weekend, and I have thought often about what I learned from him. He had retired from teaching at Emory University in Atlanta, and had started a nonprofit organization to help children and families in southern Appalachia. He also was teaching preaching to people who were keeping small rural and storefront churches alive, people with neither the time nor the money for seminary training. I asked him, "Do you ever think of retiring?" He looked at me - (I think I was making him a sandwich in my kitchen at the time), and said, "Kelly, one does not retire from one's ordination vows." He embodied that attitude of servant leadership, which he lived out with pure joy and a twinkle in his eye.

He often would say that the challenge of the Christian life is that we are not often called upon to do great heroic deeds but rather to be faithful to the small things over and over again throughout our lives.

Think about how we have tried to be faithful, day after day, week after week, for years. Supporting the church financially. Attending committee meetings. Saying "yes"

when asked to serve, to greet. Taking a meal to an elderly relative. Shoveling the next door neighbor's driveway. Sending cards. Donating blood. Our Jewish friends call these "mitzvahs", acts of neighborliness which connect us to one another and to God. It's a good way to live, a meaningful way to live —looking for ways that we can make a difference.

For most of my life, I have agreed with Fred Craddock. The challenge is keeping up our energy and encouragement for a life of one small act of neighborly love and service after another, when part of us longs for a bigger, more dramatic gesture, a way to show our faith and values in a manner that seems more significant.

But I believe we are in a different moment right now. We are being summoned to continue doing the small, daily acts of faithfulness, **but also** to live with **more courage** and **more intention** than ever before.

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus in the midst of a pandemic? What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus in the midst of a contentious presidential election? What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus now that we are newly aware of entrenched racism and inequalities? What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus when the life of the planet is in peril?

This is not the time for **only** the small acts of neighborly love, as **essential** as those still are.

In the Old Testament book of Esther, when Queen Esther is facing a daunting challenge, her cousin says to her, "Maybe you were made queen for such a time as this."

We didn't choose to live in this time, any more than people choose to live through any personal or global crisis. But it is, nevertheless, an opportunity for us to face each of these challenges, head-on, summoning up all of the resources of our faith.

Numerous passages of scripture give us examples of how to live in times that are fraught and uncertain.

Our story for today, from the gospel of Matthew, points us in several helpful directions.

First, the narrative focuses on Jesus. Jesus has just been with a huge crowd of people; he has fed 5,000 people who were gathered to hear him. He sends the disciples out in the boat, tells them he'll catch up with them later, and he goes up a mountain, by himself, to pray. One commentator says this about the importance of his example: "Things are never so turbulent or so urgent as to take us away from the necessity of prayer."

But meanwhile, back on the boat, a violent storm kicks up. The boat is far from land and battered by waves.

This story is remembered for what happens next. Jesus walks across the water towards the boat, and there are all kinds of theories about what that means. For today I want to listen in on what it is that Jesus **SAYS**, when he arrives on the boat, when he finds the disciples terrified because they think they've seen a ghost. He says, "Be encouraged; it's me. Don't be afraid." **Be encouraged. Don't be afraid.**

And then the narrative turns its attention to Peter. What is it that causes Peter to jump into the water? Some writers say it's an admirable leap of faith; Peter wants desperately to be like Jesus, to tap into that same spiritual power. Other writers say it's

pride. What I find instructive is how Jesus responds. He immediately reaches out and grabs Peter, saving him from danger.

What we learn about Jesus from this story, then, is that he embodies these three values: he is a person of prayer, a person who will stay up all night in order to reconnect with the holy one, the source of his energy and identity. He is someone who will do whatever it takes to provide calm and encouragement to the people he loves, even if it means walking across the water to reach them. And he reaches out to grab our hand when we feel as if we're sinking.

I am somewhat tempted to end this sermon with this word of comfort. I'm sure you've already connected the dots yourself and you see the easy parallels between this biblical story and our present circumstance. We are on bumpy uncharted waters, we are afraid, but we are not in this boat alone. We have one another, and we have the guidance and presence of God. I want to give you that word of comfort. I believe that it is a legitimate reading of this narrative. And we all need reassurance.

And so let us receive that word of comfort. But we don't end there. The story calls us to go further and deeper. This story doesn't only tell us who **Jesus** is; it tells us who **we** are called to be as disciples of Jesus. When Peter jumps in the water, and starts to sink, and when Jesus pulls him out, he says, "Peter, your faith is weak." It isn't a slam, it isn't even a criticism. The word Jesus uses for faith shows us that Jesus sees faith as a **verb**, not a noun. Faith is a **muscle**. The more we exercise it, the stronger it becomes. Faith is not a possession but an activity. It is like a song that disappears when we stop singing it. Jesus is acting as Peter's faith coach here; he wants Peter to

grow stronger, not so he can walk on water, but so he can live like a disciple wherever he is. **PAUSE**

We are going to need faith that is like a well-trained muscle in order to navigate these next few months. To help ourselves and our loved ones cope well with uncertainty, more disappointments, and a new normal we never would have chosen. To be able to speak up for what we believe and advocate for justice all the while maintaining humility, open minds, and the ability to live and work with people who think and vote differently than we. To respond with unselfish generosity as people in our own communities and those we don't know at all lose jobs and stand in line at food banks.

But perhaps we were made for such a time as this.

This is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was born in 1906 into a large and well-educated family in Germany. By the age of 21 he had earned his bachelor's degree, his master's degree, and a doctorate in theology from the University of Berlin, graduating summa cum laude. He could have had a gloriously illustrious career as a professor, pastor and writer. But soon he was faced with the question, "What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus when someone like Adolf Hitler is rising to power?" In April of 1933, Bonhoeffer raised the first voice for church resistance to Hitler's persecution of Jews, declaring that the church must not simply "bandage the victims under the wheel, but jam a spoke in the wheel itself."

As Hitler gained control of the country, Bonhoeffer continued to be an active resister. He taught in underground seminaries, he wrote, he even plotted to assassinate Hitler. He came to the United States for a time to teach in seminaries here, but he regretted his decision almost immediately, writing this: "I have come to the

conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I **MUST** live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people ... Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from [a place of] security.”

And so he returned to Germany and he ended up dying by execution in a concentration camp at the age of 39. I want to read you what Bonhoeffer had to say about our scripture passage for today: “Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith...The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if people imagine they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics. Faith is only real where there is obedience.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent his life in intense obedience and left behind a lasting legacy. You could say that he was made for such a time as his. **PAUSE**

I firmly believe that one day the next generations will ask us what we did in 2020. How did we help those suffering the most during the pandemic? How did we survive it with our character and dignity intact? How did we engage in the struggle against global warming, poverty, and all forms of bigotry?

And I believe Fred Craddock would remind us that we do it by living out our baptismal vows, in ways large and small. We will do it together, and we will do it with God's help and guidance.