

“Pew Potatoes”
Matthew 14:22-33

22 Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.

23 After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.

Later that night, he was there alone,

24 and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

25 Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.

26 When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified.

“It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

27 But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

28 “Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

29 “Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

31 Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him.

“You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

32 And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.

33 Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Introduction

He swings from a bold faith stepping down out of the boat, but then fear washes it away. Later, he makes the great confession of faith to Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” then switches to be used by the devil, “Get behind me, Satan.” He’s privileged to see Jesus’ brilliance on the mount of transfiguration, then opens his mouth missing the point with something about setting up tents to stay there. He boasts that he will stay with Jesus even if all the others fail, but then disappears, three times denying he even knew Jesus.

This is the same Peter who becomes the Spirit-filled leader, the spokesman for Jesus after the cross, resurrection and ascension. The Bible doesn’t give us a whitewashed, idealistic picture of what’s often called “The Heroes of the Bible.” Both ups and downs of Adam and Eve, successes and failures of Noah and his family, of Abraham and Sarah are told. Same with Moses, King David. Same with Peter, Thomas, James and John. This is one reason I believe the Bible is true. It doesn’t cover up the failures of people of faith. Instead, uses those failures to demonstrate grace and forgiveness. I’m so glad for that! I’m glad for me and for you. For which of us doesn’t experience times of faith and doubt, the intended appointment of God’s grace along with the disappointment of our own sinfulness?

One Bible teacher even applies this to the history of the church – how the church disappoints Jesus – often thinking the world’s winds stronger than the Lord’s words; yet how Jesus uses, enables, rebukes,

saves his church. Two chapters later, Jesus says to Peter, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (16:18).

I. A Valuable Gift

Peter and the disciples needed to learn that trust in Jesus is gift, a gift given in the grace of the Lord. God knows that you and I can’t sustain faith by ourselves – sooner or later we’ll disbelieve and sink. It’s a mistake to put faith in faith. Perhaps Peter was doing this when he asked and then stepped out of the boat.

At least Peter heard Jesus say, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” And then say, “Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water.” What about the other disciples as they watched Peter step out of the boat? Pastor John Ortberg writes of this gift of faith, this gift of trust. Is a “gift so valuable it can’t be risked?” Or, is “this gift so valuable it must be risked?”

In the months following my mother’s passing, what to do with her belongings has been an interesting process among her 8 children. One of my sisters-in-law asked for my mom’s china set. I remember how my mother cherished her Lennox china. But, so special was that set of dishes that I remember only a few times they were actually used.

Or, I remember a childhood friend, Evan Zarros. When we played at his house, I thought strange to walk through the living room on a heavy plastic runner to get to the stairs up to his room. The furniture was also covered with large plastic sheets. Too valuable to use? Or too valuable not to use? Along with the gift comes that choice – “whether or not you will open and use what was given to you.” In your relationship with God, which way do you usually follow?

In the 14th century epic poem, Dante’s *Inferno*, he writes, “The dismal company whose lives knew neither praise nor infamy, who against God rebelled not, nor to Him were faithful, but to self alone were true.” Written later around 1600, Shakespeare actually has a blowhard character borrow from Dante. It’s the now enormously popular but misunderstood quote, “To thine own self be true.” Dante and Shakespeare meant it to be pejorative, a wrong attitude. It’s mostly used today as a universal excuse, a get out of jail free card for having to acknowledge your own failings and biases and whims.

Peter would learn, as we should as well, “To Christ alone be true.” Acknowledge him as Lord, confess your need for the Savior, and seek his will for your life. The disciples who stayed in the boat didn’t want to risk breaking the china or wearing out the sofa (so to speak). How often you and I can be “aware of the pain of potential failure, embarrassment, inadequacy, and criticism.”

II. Growth vs. Stagnation

“But when Peter saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’”

If Jesus knew Peter was going to sink, why did answer Peter saying, “Come?” To encourage him to take risks? To teach the disciples an important lesson?

You may remember the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25. “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like... a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

Apparently, this third servant was a couch potato. Let’s just sit around until the boss comes back and give the one “talent,” the one bag of gold, the thousands of dollars back to him. Apparently, the other disciples were boat potatoes. Jesus may be out there on the water, but I’m staying right here, holding on until the wind and waves calm down. In the church, we may have “pew potatoes.” Come to church, go home; come to church, go home; come to church, go home. Warm the bench but never really get into the game. Take what we’ve heard in God’s word and take the risk of putting it into practice.

I have to admit: I can easily be a couch potato; watch tv, go from one YouTube video to another, Google search and search and search. Go for a walk? Nah, let’s watch some more. Get together with friends? Nah, I’m too tired, but not too tired to stay up too late in front of the screen.

Last night I went to the Utah football game. 40,000 fans in desperate need of exercise and 22 players desperately in need or rest. Legendary coach Vince Lombardi said, “The difference between a successful person and others isn’t a lack of strength, not a lack of knowledge, but rather a lack of will.” Always pushing his players to excellence, he said, “Individual commitment to a group effort – that’s what makes a team work, a company work, a society work.” Let’s add the church to the list.

Sometimes I feel like the Utes football team. The University of Washington sent eleven players onto the field to kick off. Then Coach Kyle Whittingham came out on the field alone, caught the ball on the five-yard-line and got smeared by a pile of Washington Huskies. (I must have dreamed that last night after the game).

But, there’s a price to pay for being a couch potato or a boat potato or a pew potato. That price is *growth*. We all love to see growth. Nate and Shannon had baby Louisa’s two-month check-up. She’s 11 pounds and doing well. Smiles abound. Mike and Karla have a basket full of beautiful red tomatoes from their garden. The miracle of garden growth is so cool. When a company expands, hires more workers, the leaders are thrilled. A 16-year-old gets his Utah driver’s license – a danger now to the rest of us, but his parents are really happy not having to be the chauffer anymore. Growth.

In John Ortberg's book, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, he says, "There are few things sadder than stagnation." Coming from the east coast, I thought swimming in the Great Salt Lake would be like swimming in the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. Wrong!

Conclusion

In the drama of walking on the water, in the parable of the talents, we must remember that Jesus is Lord of the gift. Jesus meets our needs by grace, not by our faith. As Augustine wrote about the Lord: "Command what you will; then give what you command." The emphasis in Matthew 14 is on the grace and power of Jesus. We're not told how far or how long Peter walked on the sea. But, once Jesus and Peter are back in the boat, the wind that so frightened Peter is now under Jesus' control.

When we step out in faith, storms may come. Fear can grip us. But, our risen Lord Jesus is right there with us. Faith is a consistent trust in Jesus to accomplish what we're called to do. So, when two or three miles out on the sea and the wind kicks up and waves threaten, Jesus will be there and he is completely adequate to save. Understand that your circumstances are not the measure of Jesus' love for you. For, sometimes, it takes a storm for us to see him.

Let us pray with and for each other.

from Psalm 19

The heavens declare the glory of God;

the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech;

night after night they reveal knowledge.

They have no speech, they use no words;

no sound is heard from them.

Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,

their words to the ends of the world.

The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul.

The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.

The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous.

They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;

they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.

By them your servant is warned;

in keeping them there is great reward.

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart

be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.