

**Sermon**  
**Matthew 14:22-33**  
**10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – A • Sunday, August 9, 2020**  
**Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon**

Picture it. It's 40 or 60 or 70+ years ago on a quiet street, parking lot, or dirt road. You really want to get on that shiny new bike, or maybe it's your big brother's hand-me-down. You're way too big to ride that dumb tricycle anymore. You have just announced to one or both your parents that you are ready to ride a big kid's bike. And although you told them training wheels are for babies, you're secretly kinda glad your dad put them there anyway.

And then the big moment arrives. Filled with anticipation, fear, joy, and pride, you climb onto the two-wheeled symbol of your arrival into big kid-dom. But instead of sitting on the seat as you had imagined, to get this thing going, you have to stand straight up, balancing on the pedals. It's a little wobbly at first, and you're not certain you're not going to fall – but you're bolstered on because your mom, dad, or grandpa is holding you steady. And off you go, slowly at first...because, well, it is still kinda scary – but the farther you go, the more exhilarating it gets. But it is okay, because someone is still holding you up. Then! You realize they aren't. And all the adventures you ever dreamed await you.

Matthew tells us that after feeding the 5000, Jesus **still** wanted to go off by himself to pray, which he hadn't yet had a chance to do, so he directed the disciples to take the boat and go to the other side of the lake without him. The disciples did so, only to encounter a tremendous storm at sea – at night, no less!

Very early in the morning, in the midst of the chaos, they see a phantom (a specter, or a shadowy image) coming towards them - and they panic. Jesus responds to their panic by identifying himself. In response, Peter requests that, if it is Jesus, that he wanted Jesus to let Peter join him out on the water. Jesus obliges and Peter jumps out of the boat and begins his journey over those stormy seas.

What is the **one** line we most remember about this story... *ANYONE*?  
Jesus' words recorded here...

Yeah, If Peter had only had enough faith...

Think of what he could have accomplished if only he had more faith...

Yikes, hearing the story and the message this way seem to indicate that perhaps Peter wasn't good enough. If, as some scholars suggest that the Peter that Matthew portrays is sort of an "everyman," every-human, what does that say about us? Are WE not good enough? Is this story some kind of legalistic dogma?

Before I get going too far out on a limb, I wanted to stress the importance language and meaning has for us. Whether it's a shaded nuance in the meaning of a word or phrase, or it's the tiniest inflection in our voice – the point we're trying to get across can be misinterpreted by the hearer or reader even in the best of circumstances.

Think back on the last e-mail message you sent that someone misinterpreted. You might have used capital letters to stress a point, but the one who received your letter just thought you were "yelling" at them! There's lots of room for error between sender and receiver!

For many years, people have used the nuanced language in today's gospel text to make a point. A point I think is different from the one that was intended... Now to show how difficult it sometimes is to ascertain without a shadow of a doubt what scripture says, let's take today's gospel story of Peter walking on the water.

In the thick of his journey Peter realizes that the wind was REALLY strong, making those waves awfully big-and after he excitedly took that leap of faith, he begins to sink. And in panic, he cries out. Jesus grabs hold of his hand and says, "Oligopiste, why did you doubt?" Now I don't know about you, but I remember hearing countless sermons about the lack of faith Peter demonstrated during his remarkable journey on the water. Such sermons were no doubt prompted by the interpretation of the Greek word, *oligopiste*, as "Ye of little faith."

"Ye of little faith, why did you doubt?" Now Jesus' words to Peter as rendered in this text have always puzzled me because I always thought that, from **my** perspective, it took an **AWFUL LOT** of faith for Peter to jump out of that boat in the first place-and in the middle of a storm at night, no less! It was crazy! Then, many years later, I heard a talk given by a friend, Pastor Cindy Witt, who pointed out that there was another possible interpretation of what Jesus said to Peter that sounded VERY different. Technically, oligopiste means "little believer." oligo: "little"; piste: believer. "Little believer, why did you doubt?" Kinda like, oh, your faith is like a little mustard seed (from our text a couple of weeks ago). Your faith will blossom and grow.

So, not only does "little believer" sound more appropriate for Jesus to say in reference to someone who has just jumped out of a boat on stormy seas, it also takes into account the leap of faith Peter **did** take. He **was** a believer-and no one BUT a fairly STRONG believer would have taken the leap of faith that he did. But, on the other hand, Peter was also a "LITTLE believer"...he still had a lot more to learn, namely, **that** Jesus would not let him **down**-and in this case, not let him **drown**.

"Little believer, why did you doubt?" That makes for a whole different sermon and a whole different lesson about faith and life. That is but one example of how sometimes the technicality of Biblical interpretation can completely alter both what we hear the Bible saying and also why we may not always agree about what the Bible says. In this case, one word implied two very different responses of Jesus to Peter. One "fit" my prior knowledge about Jesus and the typically sensitive and compassionate way Jesus tended to treat people-and another that seemed totally out of character. But who's to say which, ultimately, is right?? Only God knows. Which is, of course, my point here. We do the best we can to interpret the best we can.

So it is that with all these variables-and many others-we approach scripture, seeking to hear a word from God for us and for our world.

I kinda like this back and forth, so we're going to try it again with another attempt at figuring out what it is that Matthew is getting at in this story.

Why **were** the disciples crossing the lake?

To get to the other side, of course.

Here, Jesus has sent the disciples across the lake to minister to the Gentiles on the other side. They are taking Jesus' teachings to a community that was outside their own. These people would have been strangers to them. Yet they will share their faith and ultimately to bring others into their community. Their community was the church. Greek word for ship is nave. Nave is church, in ancient time, a boat was the symbol of the church. Anyone who has ever been in the nave at Central surely has seen the boat hanging from the ceiling. By stepping out of the boat, Peter was symbolically stepping out of his community.

But I still think Matthew is getting at more than this. Sure, I like to think these new understandings help get us closer to Matthew's intended meaning, but there's an even bigger point that he makes, one that is **so** nuanced that we almost miss it.

Even after we examine what it was that Jesus said to Peter, it's important to remember that it wasn't Peter's action that kept him afloat. **It was God's doing.** Neither Peter or Peter's **faith** had anything to do with it...because it was **God's** action that had everything to do with it. But even that is still not the full point I think Matthew is getting at – although it **IS** related.

Think back to Jesus' first words to Peter. Peter asks if what he is seeing is a ghost or if it is Jesus. Jesus says "Take heart, it is I." Now I looked in seven different translations (with the KJV saying, 'be of good cheer, it is I' – in a storm?!!!! But I digress), and all of these translations except the contemporary paraphrase, *The Message*, used the strange-sounding phrase, "it is I. "

Any English teachers/grammarians in the congregation? *The Message* used, "it is me." **Wouldn't that be more correct?** I think that the reason "it is I" is used in each of the translations is actually a nuance of Matthew's point. In a subtle way, Matthew reminds his readers, who are primarily Jewish converts, and people who would be very familiar with the Hebrew text, that they have heard this language, this phrase before. It's nuanced, but it is there.

**It is I. I AM. I AM WHO I AM.**

These were the words God spoke to Moses, which were recorded in Exodus 3.

This was **God's** name. Jesus evokes the self-identification of God. **Yahweh. I am.**

I think that the point Matthew makes is that the disciples were in God's presence. Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the one who was to come. He was there in their midst. Jesus calmed the storm. Jesus calms the storms of our lives.

God is with us in Jesus.

Jesus was God. Jesus is the **one** who makes **God present to us** in a chaotic world.

The last two verses of our gospel text sum up Matthew's point nicely, I think. "When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." And for once, the disciples get it. It's as if the training wheels had come off and they were ready to go out into the world filled with faith enough to do the work they were called to do.

Imagine this as your own story...

Who was it that was sent to tell you....to

How was that message proclaimed to you?

How did you hear it?

And how has that helped you so that you, too, can go out into the world, minus those training wheels?

May it be so with us.

Amen.