

Faith Flunky

10th Sunday After Pentecost

August 13, 2017

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Genesis 37:1-4, 12-18, Romans 10:5-15, Matthew 14:22-33

Are you fearful today, friends? I am. We are going to spend some time today talking about fear. I will start with a simple personal story about fear and we will end talking about some more complicated fear.

I am scared of the water. I know that is a practically heretical thing to say in August in West Michigan, but its true! I love the sun and the beach, but swimming? Not so much. I will say I have a pretty good reason for fearing it, which stems back to being 5 years old. See, my mother never learned to swim and had a fear of water herself, so she did what any good mother does, she projected that fear onto me and my brothers, forcing us to take swimming lessons to make up for the fact that she never did. In fact, she made me stick it out with lessons until I was 15, when I even got my certification to be a lifeguard. The fear didn't just relate to the fact that I was always the slowest swimmer in my class, or that the chlorine made my curly hair look like a creepy clown.

The fear started on Day 1 of swimming lessons.

I was terrified of the pool. All of my other classmates jumped in and splashed around like little hyperactive tadpoles, but I stood

on the edge of the pool refusing to jump in without floaties on my arms. 5 minutes went by as I stood shivering by the pool, arms crossed, my head shaking its disapproval, then 10, then 15, until it became abundantly clear that no amount of coaxing by my teacher Mrs. Stariha was going to motivate me to jump into that pool. So while she got the rest of the class started on blowing bubbles and treading water, Mrs. Stariha had her assistant John work with me.

John was a jerk. He stood in the water and tried every sort of manipulation to get me to jump into the pool into his outstretched arms. I wasn't buying what he was selling. I knew that the moment I jumped into that water, he would step away instead of catching me, and I would be done for. John would have blood on his hands. (I might have also had a bit of a flare for the dramatic.) Finally, after 55 minutes of standing on the edge of the pool and watching the other kids have fun, I caved. I figured even if my instincts didn't allow me to trust John, I could trust that the water was at least marginally safe, by watching the laughter of my classmates. Not to mention, I knew that if I didn't at least get my hair a little wet, my mother would chew me out when she picked me up, seeing that her desires and money were wasted.

I stepped to the tiled edge of the pool, prayed to God to help me, wiggled my toes in the lukewarm water, took a deep breath,

plugged my nose with my fingers, clenched my eyes shut and jumped.

John the Jerk stepped away from me as I flailed into a certain watery death, when something unexpected happened. Once the initial panic of hitting the water unassisted passed for just a second, I realized I could touch the bottom of the pool. Instead of taking my last breath, I stood flat footed on the bottom of the pool, the water lapping around my ears and saved my breath for something more life giving than drowning. I screamed at John for not catching me.

I had so little faith.

We have a complicated relationship with fear and faith; When you watch the horrors happening in Charlottesville, the dysfunctions in Washington, or even the brokenness in our own city, are you filled with faith or fear? More on this in a minute, but first, lets see how our gospel passage today addresses it.

In Matthew, there is much for the disciples to fear. When Jesus describes the ministry they will be doing in chapter 10, he tells them ministry means being beaten, flogged, physically dragged and hated for following Jesus. Later, the Roman ruler Herod executes John the Baptist and gifted the head to his step-daughter. The disciples were the ones who not only received John the Baptist's body for burial, but also shared the news with Jesus about the murder of his cousin. And while they are on a boat in

the midst of a terrifying storm in this passage, Jesus had also calmed another storm they were caught in, in chapter 4. While we imagine that a life following Jesus might be one of adventure, self-denial and picking up one's own cross, we don't always think of following Jesus as a life engaging anxiety, questioning, and even battling terror. Perhaps the reason scriptures tell us "Do not be afraid" so often is because a life of faith is fraught by so many circumstances that WILL cause fear and being swallowed up by it keeps us from acting in faith.

There is so much fear and so little faith.

This takes us to the scene on the boat today. We don't know exactly why the disciples were sent off on a boat alone, only that Jesus sent them before he goes up a mountain alone to pray. I don't know about you, but if I was one of the 12 on that boat, I'd be blinded by terror. Being trapped on a sailboat with rolling waves and high winds would be traumatizing, erasing my trust in God, not building it. I'd be sitting on the bottom of that boat, eyes clenched shut praying for a miracle, not opening my eyes fully expecting to find one. Now of course, the disciples were fishermen and had probably been in more than a couple storms, but nothing could have prepared them for having a ghost like figure walk out to them. In fact, I'd be willing to bet this vision was terrifying.

They had so little faith.

But, there was also one mustard seed sized part of their heart that believed that if they prayed for help, they'd actually receive it. Sure enough, help arrives. But they mistook their rescuer for a source of terror. Like an unseen tile floor at the bottom of the pool, Jesus, their help in times of trouble, appears.

Then Peter says something astonishing. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." When Jesus says "come", he steps to the edge of the boat, wiggles his toes in the water, plugs his nose and jumps. Despite feeling terrified, he moves in direct opposition of his fear.

He had a little faith.

Now this is where things get tricky. I think a lot of people see what happens next and think Peter is a complete failure. He jumps into the water with bravado and lasts a few moments before he freaks out and starts to sink in front of his peers. It even seems that Jesus is calling him out as a failure when he says "You of little faith, why did you doubt?". It would be easy to call Peter a Faith Flunky.

But is that what really happens? Did Peter flunk out in faith or is Jesus showing us something else here?

The gospel of Matthew says a lot about having faith. People credited in Matthew as having great faith are the Roman Centurion, a non-Jew, who risks his reputation and career when asking Jesus to heal his servant by only speaking a word. In

matthew 9 a group of men had collective communal faith which Jesus credited as healing the paralytic man they carried in. There are all sorts of degrees of faith in Matthew, so what about those with just a little faith?

In chapter 6, Jesus teaches that if God cares for the birds of the air, he will certainly care for us, if we have little faith. When Jesus calms the other storm for the disciple on the boat in chapter 8, he says something similar as he does today "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?"

In chapter 16, just two chapters from today's passage in Matthew , Jesus explains. He tells the disciples that if they have faith even the size of a mustard seed, they can move mountains. All that is required of a follower of Jesus, is just the tiniest bit of faith. Not a faith that we associate as making you eligible for sainthood. Not a faith that never experiences doubt or questions. Not a faith that makes you feel confident and ready to jump into a pool of fears. Rather this faith, a little bit of faith, the faith that is the size of a millimeter mustard seed, this faith that is a David facing a Goliath of pure unadulterated terror, anxiety, anger, and even sin, this faith, is that which changes a boat full of fear to a boat filled with joyful worship. This kind of faith takes you from the bottom of a boat taking on water to stepping off the side of it to a God ready to catch you if you fall or even give up. This is no Jerky John, this is a cosmic life guard.

We have so little faith.

What are you afraid of? Are you afraid of an unstable leader with the codes to nuclear weapons? Are you afraid, intimidated, angered, and overwhelmed by the hate of white supremacists trying to thwart their dominance here even in the year 2017? Are you afraid of your own powerlessness to help? Are you afraid of what others will think? Are you afraid for your safety or the safety of your loved ones?

We have so little faith.

What could you accomplish, what could **we** ordinary people accomplish, if we began exercising our mustard seed sized faith, even in our fear? What if, like Peter in the boat, we took a risk in our fear, even if we aren't sure of ourselves? Even if the storm seems so intense that there is no way one human could calm it?

What would happen if we stepped out of the boat? Could you transform the life of an elementary school kid needing a mentor, even if the idea of kids scares you? Could you transform the lives of Haitian people by buying a blueberry pie or 50? Could we soften the hearts of our denomination by looking for ways to love on others in other churches? Could we minister to those in our community who are gay, queer, or trans by volunteering for the Room for All conference? Could we even de-escalate global war tensions by reaching out to our government leaders? Could we put our lives on the line by standing up for people of color? Could

we call out racism when we see it in our everyday lives instead of keeping silent? Could we invite the Holy Spirit to show us the ways we perpetuate oppression either implicitly or directly?

Friends, the Holy Spirit has given us a little bit of faith.

Where are you feeling uncomfortable in your life? What problem in our world or even in your personal life scares you? Is it time to act on your little bit of faith? We belong to a God who doesn't need us to be perfect or more than what we are. We belong to a God who takes our day old bread and cans of tuna and feeds an entire crowd with it. The waters of oppression, brokenness, and pain are turbulent and stormy, but we serve a God who not only makes those waters into a path, but also grabs our hand when we take risks out of our comfort zones.

I know you are scared, have doubt, and are overwhelmed by obstacles, I am too. What Jesus asks of us, is to not ignore obstacles, but to not let them have the last say either. If we wait to feel more confident or better about about a problem, we will never step out of the boat.

What God asks of us is not to ignore the storm, but to step into it with God, trusting God has us, even as we lose heart and begin to sink. We are not in this storm alone, friends. Do you want to be closer to God? Move into the storm. That is where God's spirit is already abiding. Do you want to hear God's voice? Then listen. God is the voice saying, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

In closing, I want to reflect on the more complicated fears regarding North Korea and Charlottesville. I admit that in preparing a message for you today, I have felt helpless and ill-equipped to stand here and begin to know what to say, how to convict you, or how to encourage you to act. I know that we belong to a God of love and justice and I know that a prayer to be an instrument of justice and peace is always a prayer God will answer. So let us stand in the little faith we have been given and pray this this famous prayer by the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton.

“Lord God, We have no idea where we are going. We do not see the road ahead of us. We cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do we really know ourselves, and the fact that we think that we are following your will does not mean that we are actually doing so. But we believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And we hope we have that desire in all that we are doing. We hope that we will never do anything apart from that desire. And we know that if we do this you will lead us by the right road, though we may know nothing about it. Therefore will we trust you always, though we may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. We will not fear, for you are ever with us, and you will never leave us to face our perils alone.” Amen.