

Matthew 14:22-32 Bill Uetrict 8.10.23

I think that at times in the life of faith fear gets a bad rap. A lot of Christians talk as if getting rid of fear is what faith is all about. Now don't get me wrong. Fear is a problem. Fear cripples faith sometimes. Fear stops us in our tracks too often. Fear prevents us from doing so much. I know it did me. When I was young, there were many things, particularly physical activities, that I didn't do because I was afraid. I didn't ice skate, I didn't roller skate, I didn't water ski because I was afraid. Fear held me back. Fear was a big problem for me.

Fear is a big problem for most of us, and a poignant one for our society right now. For a while, the politics of fear has dominated our culture. Create an enemy and then identify what horrific thing that enemy will bring about. It sells. It gets people all worked up and can create a temporary community. We all know who we are against. Many politicians and even some religious leaders are adept at this kind of fear mongering.

So, obviously, fear is destructive, divisive. Fear often is the driving force behind racism, sexism, and the other isms that are common in our lives. Fear of the other, fear of difference, fear of losing power—they help create the isms that separate us.

And what's more, fear can do economic damage. I lived in a neighborhood in Toledo that many people labeled "bad." And you know what happens when neighborhoods get that kind of label? People refuse to go there, and they don't spend money there. And the neighborhood suffers. It suffers because of fear, sometimes, frankly, an unwarranted fear.

So clearly, fear does great damage to our individual and corporate lives. Why, then, would I say that fear gets a bad rap? Why would I want to say that it has a role to play in the life of faith? Honestly, we don't do our best work when it is fear that drives us, but fear is normal.

Human beings are often afraid. Have you noticed that in the Bible when the heavenly realm makes an appearance, that realm (an angel, a messenger of some kind) frequently says, “Do not be afraid.” If the heavenly realm almost always communicates that, we as humans must frequently live in fear. Fear must be common to humanness.

In our readings for today, we have two very important Biblical figures, Biblical heroes, and both of them are living in fear. Elijah, one of Israel’s first prophets and the one who is expected to usher in the coming of the Messiah, is hiding. Honestly, he has reason to do so. And this is one of the first things we need to grasp in order to understand why I am claiming that fear gets a bad rap. Yes, many of the things we fear never transpire. We live with a lot of unwarranted fear. We worry about stuff that isn’t worthy of our attention and anxiety. But sometimes, there is reason to be afraid. Sometimes bad diagnoses come our way. Sometimes accidents happen. Sometimes there is reason to be cautious and afraid.

Elijah had reason. Queen Jezebel is after him, and she’s got a lot of military might. She can take care of him. And besides, he’s just taken care of some of her spokespeople. She has reason for revenge. No wonder he has had enough of this job. No wonder he hid in a cave for a while. No wonder the heavenly realm needs to kick him in the behind and get him moving. And by the way, what the heavenly realm tells Elijah in today’s text is that there’s more work for him to do. Fear, while understandable, is not to cripple him. God has big jobs for him to do, even if one of the jobs is finding his own replacement!

In our gospel reading, Peter reveals fear. Now in the Gospel of Matthew, Peter generally gets pretty good press. In Mark, he’s a bumbling character who seldom gets it right. In Matthew, Peter is the one upon whom the church is built, a reality that explains why the

Roman church so loves the Gospel of Matthew. For them, Peter was the first pope. They like a gospel that makes the first pope look good.

But note this. This great hero still lives with fear. Matthew tells us that as the disciples, Peter included, see Jesus walking on the storm-battered sea, they are terrified. They cry out in fear, we are told. And as Peter goes out on the water to be with Jesus, he begins to sink because he is frightened. Peter, the great hero, has fear.

Many folks, when they hear Jesus' response to Peter's action, think that Jesus is chastising him. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" They understand Jesus' words as communicating something like this: "Peter, you have little faith; that's why you can't walk on the water."

That certainly is one way of interpreting Jesus' response. But again, in Matthew, Peter is generally heroic. And what's more, Matthew uses the term "little ones" frequently to refer to the disciples. It's an endearing term, one that sees them as vulnerable yet central to the work of Jesus. The disciples aren't supposed to be anything but "little ones." Maybe "little" faith is okay. Elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus speaks of faith the size of a mustard seed being able to move mountains. I don't know for sure, but maybe Jesus isn't chastising Peter. You know, "If you would have kept your eyes on me, if you wouldn't be afraid, you wouldn't have sunk."

Let's face it. Peter was the one willing to come out on the water. Peter was the one willing to risk. He had a little faith that got him out of the boat. I have to wonder if we misread this story thinking of it as a giant finger shaking its disapproval at us telling us: "Don't ever be afraid; let faith conquer your fear."

To be human is to be afraid. To be human is to have fears. It's okay to be human. It's okay to be like Elijah and Peter. I find it fascinating to note that in Matthew's gospel Jesus walks on the *sea*,

while Peter attempts to walk on the *water*. Our job isn't to conquer chaos, the big forces of life. We leave that to Jesus. We simply are invited to walk out on the water.

Maybe we do a great disservice to this marvelous, metaphorical story out of Matthew by focusing on Peter's perceived inadequate act of faith. What strikes me about the story is what Jesus does in the story. What happens after Peter takes the risk and begins to sink is the most compelling thing to me. Jesus immediately reaches out his hand and catches him. Perhaps this is the biggest point. It's not that we shouldn't have fear. It's not that we shouldn't ever be afraid. To have fear is to be human. To fall is to be human. To be overwhelmed is to be human. But we know of a hand that reaches out and grasps us in the midst of our humanness. We know of a sea of love and grace that cushions our falling, envelops us in the midst of our humanness, stands by us with us.

The call is not to eliminate fear, to conquer it. The call is in the midst of the fear to trust something bigger than the fear. The call is not to allow fear to paralyze us. There is no doubt that when you follow Jesus you are going to be invited to come out on the water, as Peter was. There is no doubt that when you follow Jesus and you are ready to hide, you are going to be given something more to do, not less, as Elijah was. There is no doubt that when you follow Jesus you are going to be compelled not to allow fear to shape your life. You'll have fear, and you will be afraid. But you will be urged not to allow your fear to stop you in your tracks.

Remember this. It is God who speaks to Elijah and sends him on his way. It is Jesus who stands out on the water and says to Peter, "Come." What's inviting you to risk is love. It's love which wants to get you out of the boat. So, come. Come out on the water. Sit in a different pew. Talk to people you have never talked to. Try food that you have

never tried. Learn to roller skate. Go into neighborhoods that you have never gone into. Be the one who volunteers to lead prayer. Speak up in a group. Take on a job that you thought you could never do. Leave behind the politics of fear. Don't follow folks who simply want to stoke fear. Learn from people who are different from you—different in race, gender, ethnic origin, sexual orientation. Come out on the water!

Might you fall? Might you say something stupid, something incorrect? Might you become a little uncomfortable? Might you fail? Might you tick off your relatives and friends who like to live with stoked fear? Might your fear resurface, even if you try hard to bury it? Yes! Probably! But come out on the water anyway! Love is inviting you, and love will grab you.

One of the things that is often not noted about the story of Jesus walking on the sea is that probably Peter needed some help to get out of the boat, a boat being battered by waves. I suspect that he needed to grab hold of the hands of his fellow disciples in order not to fall inside the boat. He needed the assistance of others to get out of the boat. Love is inviting you. Love is accompanying you. Come out on the water. And by the way, often, the water is *just fine*.