

Date: August 7, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 19

SERMON: Stepping Out of the Boat

Text(s): Matthew 14:22-32; Romans 10:5-12

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In coming to Maine, I knew I was coming to the land of boats, since we had fallen in love with the Maine coast while vacationing here when our children were small. The lobster boats are still my favorites; there's just something intrinsically appealing in their simple lines and functional design. And over the years, as I've pursued my ruling passion of photography, boats have frequently appeared in my pictures.

Boats and boating in Maine, however, is very different from what it was in western Pennsylvania when I was growing up. My grandfather was a fanatical fresh-water fisherman, and as long as I can remember, had a 12-foot aluminum boat with an eight horsepower outboard motor which was all we needed for the lakes or the Allegheny River where I spent a good portion of my childhood attempting to coax wily largemouth bass or northern pike to attach themselves to the end of our lines.

In Paris, on the Seine River just a few hundred yards upstream from our apartment, there was a mooring spot for those 40-foot houseboats called *peniches* that are so common in Europe, and we enjoyed seeing how different people outfitted them. Apart from a futile attempt to convince Carol that we ought to buy a *peniche* as our retirement home and spend our retirement years cruising the canals and rivers of Europe, I think my attraction to boats will remain primarily photographic. When I get the urge to buy one, that familiar definition pops into my mind— you know, the one that defines a boat as “a hole in the water into which the owner pours money.”

Today's gospel lesson from St. Matthew is a story in which a boat figures prominently. It may be helpful before we dive into the story itself to understand a bit about the background against

which Matthew wrote his gospel in the last decade or so of the first century in order to appreciate how skillfully he takes this story that he got from Mark's gospel and used it to speak a new word to his own audience. The family feud within Judaism that had been growing since Jesus' own time, had, by Matthew's time, resulted in a split-off of the Jesus movement from its parent tradition. We can catch glimpses of these tensions at many points in this gospel, and one of Matthew's concerns is to define his brand of Jewish Christianity as the new Israel, a new people of God which is emerging from the old Israel. And so he weaves the stories of Jesus to which he has access into a theological biography of sorts, that will establish Jesus as the new Moses for a new Israel.

Our story this morning follows the story of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the crowds. After the disciples have gathered up twelve baskets full of leftovers from the miraculous feeding of the multitude (12 baskets, 12 disciples, 12 tribes of Israel— you get the picture of the way Matthew loads symbolic meaning onto the details of a story), Jesus tells them to get in the boat and go across the Sea of Galilee to the other side. He then dismisses the crowds and this action shifts the focus from the crowds, their needs, their demands, their fascination with Jesus, to the disciples, and particularly to Jesus' attempts to form them into the leaders of the new community.

Following his pattern of going off to pray and think before embarking on a new stage of his mission, he then goes up the hillside overlooking the lake, and spends the remainder of the day until evening there alone in prayer and reflection.

From that high vantage point, he sees that his disciples are having tough sailing, and have managed to travel only a few miles from shore. The boat, Matthew tells us, “*was battered by the waves, for the wind was against them.*” Given the way in which he attaches metaphorical significance to most of the details in these stories, we're probably on very safe ground to assume that in Matthew's hands, the boat is more than

just a boat. It's a houseboat for the people of God; it's a veritable "ark of safety" for the community of Jesus' followers who are being buffeted by the waves of opposition and even persecution from their families or neighbors or fellow synagogue members. It is very likely Matthew's use of the boat in this story that gave rise to the boat becoming a very early Christian symbol for the church, one which is carved on many early Christian altarpieces or in paintings or frescoes. But the boat is not only a place of refuge; it's also, as we will see, a working boat for the mission of Jesus and his disciples to fish the waters of human need and catch many in the gospel net.

So Jesus decides to go to join them. He doesn't have to swim, apparently, like the rest of us. He just walks on the water, and in a few hours, in the middle of the night, he's approaching them. And it's here that the story really gets interesting.

When they see this figure striding toward them over the waves, Matthew says "*they were terrified, saying, 'It's a ghost!' and cried out in fear.*" Well, who wouldn't, for God's sake! I don't know about you, but I haven't seen too many people walking on the water lately. Walking on the ice to a smelt shack on the Androscoggin during the winter is not the same thing. And despite all the Hollywood horror flicks about ghosts and the living dead or even the comedies like *Ghostbusters*, I don't think that's what we're dealing with here. The word "fear" that Matthew uses is the sort of fear that people feel in the presence of the Divine—it's the awesome dread in the face of a power vastly greater than anything mortal. It's the dread that we feel when our world turns topsy-turvy and nothing makes sense anymore, or when we sense that life has turned an unexpected corner, and we're being called or summoned by something or someone that's bigger than we are, and if we respond, nothing will ever be the same again. Call it fear of the future, if you will. We're

shaken out of our comfort zone, and it scares us nearly to death. But Jesus immediately responds to his disciples' reaction by saying, "*Fear not. It's only me.*" Now, it's perfectly acceptable, as the translators of modern English versions do, to render the Greek phrase *ego eimi* as "It's me" or "It's only me," But I think that Matthew may not be using it in quite so colloquial a fashion. For that same phrase is also the translation of the Hebrew name for God that is too holy to pronounce aloud, the name by which God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush, the name unique to the God of Israel. When Moses, in that story from Exodus, encountered some divine power that addressed him from the midst of the burning bush, and sent him on a mission to liberate Israel from slavery in Egypt, Moses asked, "What's your name? Whom shall I tell them sent me to be their liberator," God replied, "*I AM.*" That's all. Just "I AM."

And that's what Jesus tells the disciples when he comes to them. "*Don't be afraid,*" he tells them, "*I AM.*" The clear implication is that the very God whose presence inspired holy awe or fear in Moses and called him to a new vocation and mission is the same God who is present in this encounter of the disciples in the boat with Jesus. And Jesus' message is, "Don't be afraid." This divine-human encounter may be fearful, but it's not fatal. It only feels as though it might be.

Peter, at least, must have grasped this to some degree, because he asks, "*Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you on the water.*" And Jesus, says, OK, come ahead.

And Peter does. Just like that, he steps out of the boat into the storm-tossed sea and starts strolling over toward Jesus. It's a courageous, gutsy move. Some might say impetuous and foolhardy, but let's give Peter credit for being willing to take a risk. And for a few moments, while he's looking at Jesus, he keeps his footing on those treacherous waves. He's doing it. He's doing what Jesus does. He's

walking on water the way Jesus walks on water.

But it doesn't last, does it. His peak moment of real faith, of real trust, of genuine commitment to Christ doesn't last, any longer than our own moments of real faith or commitment do. Why? Because Peter gets his focus off of Jesus and begins to look at the waves instead. Instead of the waves remaining in his peripheral vision, they become central. Can't you just imagine the thoughts that race through his mind in an instant? "Whoa, what am I doing out here? Am I insane or what? Oh no, that next one's going to get me for sure!"

I've got to confess, that I can really identify with Peter here. I don't know about you, but when it comes to faith, the best I can manage is moments of real trust, real faith now and then. Most of the time, I'm like the other disciples; I stay in the boat where it's safe, and even then, the boat stays tied up at the dock if there's any prospect of rough water. And I suspect I'm not alone. Contemporary novelist and Presbyterian preacher, Frederick Beuchner, in his book *The Alphabet of Grace* says that when he looks in the mirror in the morning, he sees a person who, much of the time is at least as much a pig as he is a Christian, and most times, he wonders whether he is a Christian in any sense that means anything to Christ or anyone else. I can relate to that, can you?

At least Peter was willing to step out of the boat and give it the old college try. The fact that his faith was wavering, that fact that he began focusing on the dangers instead of on Christ's call to him, only makes him all the more appealing for those of us who have never even dreamt that Christ might call us, much less be willing to step out of the safety of the boat and risk anything to follow that call.

When Peter takes his eyes off Jesus, when the waves become more real than his trust in Jesus' power, he goes down. And he cries out in desperation, "*Lord, save me.*"

The word "save" here also is loaded with a surplus of meaning. It's the term specifically used for salvation in the ultimate sense; it's salvation from the very power of death to render our lives meaningless and absurd. It's salvation from futility, from despair, from hopelessness. Or, to use the language St. Paul does in our epistle lesson, it is justification for our very existence. *For with the heart, one believes (or trusts or commits) and so is justified, and with the lips, one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.* That term "justified" means that our existence is justified. Our lives are justified. Our lives count for something. We're not merely complex bundles of DNA; we're more than that. We're not just victims of circumstance, powerless against the buffeting waves and the stormy winds of life. We can be more than that. We are justified, and therefore, we can be saved from the futility or despair or hopelessness into which we often fall. Our lives can be so much more than they often are, because God has already justified our existence.

Living into that justification, however, is where faith, or trust, as both Matthew and Paul understand it comes in. Peter was fine walking on those waves so long as he trusted in the power of Jesus to keep him up. So long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, the waves were like a sidewalk for him. So long as his focus was not on himself, on his inner fears or his failures or on the fearful circumstances in which he found himself, he was just fine. It was only when he stopped trusting, that he began to sink.

But Peter's cry for salvation brings him just that: Jesus escorts him back to the boat, and he himself gets in the boat with Peter and the other disciples. He chides them gently, "*Why did you doubt, you bunch of little-faiths?*" And their response is to worship him. And their worship takes the form of what we might call a "profession of faith," "*Truly, you are the Son of God.*" That is probably as good a description as anything else of what worship is about and why

we keep coming to worship week after week. It's when we gather together, all in the same boat with one another and with Christ, that we truly recognize and understand who Christ is. We also recognize that with him in our boat, we are indeed in an ark of safety, but also in a vessel from which to launch out on our mission. The boat is designed to get us out there where the wind and waves are, out where the fish are, and that's where we have to learn to have the faith that can walk on water.

This story challenges us to think not only about how we can be personally more faithful or courageous, more open to encountering and following Christ in surprising ways; I think it also speaks to us also about what kind of boat First Parish Church is or might be. We could be a luxury cruise ship so large and safe and self-contained that we do not even notice whether the seas of life around us are stormy or calm. Or we could be a "working boat" like the lobster boats of Maine, in which we can chug our way through some choppy water or windy weather while fully engaged in the work Christ calls us to do together in his company. Do we have the courage to take the risks of faith and trust that as we keep our eyes on Christ, we will be able, not only to survive the buffeting waves, but to walk on them?