

SERMON
St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, VA
The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II, Curate
August 6, 2011

<p>The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 14 Revised Common Lectionary (Year A) Matthew 14:22-33</p>
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In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I always referred to myself as Coach Bryant's "special student."

Ten years ago, Sarah Bryant was the assistant head coach of the Hamilton College women's ice hockey team. The part of her job that I'm sure she liked the least was teaching freshmen physical education. I was brand new to college life, and the part of my job that I liked the least was *taking* freshman physical education.

But, there we were, twice a week, me and Coach Bryant, standing on the blue line. She tried her best to teach me how to ice skate, that is, how to walk on frozen water. And, I did my best to apologize for my complete inability to perform even the simplest of maneuvers. We staged this little vaudeville routine so many times, that for the next four years, Coach Bryant and I would quietly smile at one another whenever our paths crossed on campus.

Not because of my aptitude, but instead because of my ineptitude, I am sure that I was, indeed, Coach Bryant's "special student."

If Jesus had picked a "special student" from among his disciples, it would have been St. Peter. Peter was full of heart and enthusiasm, but he was also a bungler. Peter tries so hard to learn the ways of Christ. He wants so badly to understand Jesus' message. But, Peter just can't seem to get it right. He does not learn until the very end of his life, that he is able to trust completely the will and providence of God.

Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel is one of the more dramatic episodes in the story of Jesus, the great teacher, and Peter, his "special student." Today's story picks-up where last week's story left off:

Together, Jesus and his disciples have just fixed five thousand fish sandwiches. When the picnic comes to an end and the leftovers have been gathered up, Jesus puts his friends in a boat bound for home and heads up the mountain to pray.

As the sun sets, a violent storm rolls in, trapping the disciples in their boat. The sea churns all night. The waves crash and the winds blow. The boat is tossed to and fro, its planks creaking and its sails ripping. For hours, the disciples are lost on an angry sea, filled with fear, praying for their lives.

This perilous feeling would have been familiar to the disciples. Not all that long before, they had been trapped in another boat, on another sea, during another storm. That night, Jesus was with them

in the boat. He rebuked the wind and calmed the sea.¹ But, this frightful night, Jesus was on the mountain.

The tempest does not relent. The storm rages through the night, and the disciples must have begun to wonder why Jesus had left them alone on a night that was almost assuredly going to be their last.

But then, in those pregnant moments just before dawn, Jesus appears, walking on the water.

In the first storm, Jesus calmed the waters and then asked the disciples why they were afraid. In this storm, he allows the winds to blow and instead insists that the disciples trust him: “Take heart [my friends]...” “Be of good cheer...” “...it is I; do not be afraid.”² Calmly, gracefully, peacefully: “Do not be afraid.”

Perhaps frustrated that Jesus did not do to this storm what he had done to the last, Peter immediately puts Jesus to the test: “Lord, if it is you, command me to walk on the water.”

I suspect that Jesus just shook his head: C’mon Peter. Come to me. Get out of the boat and walk on the water.

And, Peter walks.

In the midst of a raging storm, and from within the confines of his mortal flesh, Peter walks on the water. By faith, Peter performs a superhuman feat. By faith, by heeding the call of Christ, Peter is empowered to do that which up until then only Jesus had been able to do.

One of the most difficult theological concepts for me to get my mind wrapped around is the idea that Jesus has equipped us to do things that are beyond the pale of human strength. Jesus said, “As you go [on your way]...cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons...”³

How are we to do these things? How are we to heal and to raise? To cleanse and to cast out? How are we, mere mortals, to walk on the water with Christ? These are the things that only God can do. These are the things that Jesus did so as to prove that he was the Son of God. These are the things that lie wholly and solely within the purview of the divine.

Yet, Jesus says in another place, “...the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, [will do even] greater works than these...”⁴

Ours is a question of faith. Have we the faith we need to do greater works than these? Have we the faith we need to do greater works than he who was sent to bring near the kingdom of God?

¹ Matthew 8:23-27

² The insertion “Be of good cheer” is drawn from the King James rendering of the same passage, Matthew 14:27.

³ Matthew 10:7-8 (NRSV)

⁴ John 14:12 (NRSV)

The boat must have rocked a little as Peter stepped over the railing, and Peter must have wobbled a little as he learned to walk on the waves. There is nothing easy about stepping off of a boat in the midst of a raging storm, stepping from safety to uncertainty trusting only in the providence of God. Yet, Peter finds the faith he needs. Peter finds the faith he needs, and I suspect that Jesus smiled as his “special student” began to succeed for the very first time, as Peter traversed a tempestuous sea at the invitation of the Son of God.

Peter’s brain will soon catch up with his body. Just as he gets comfortable walking on the water, he begins to realize what he is doing. He can’t make sense of it all, and he knows that it shouldn’t be possible for him to do what he is doing. His fear rises, his faith wanes, and Peter splashes down into the sea with all the drama of a housecat falling into a bathtub.

Peter fails his own test of faith. Peter fails his own test, and in so doing his body becomes imperiled by the very same sea that he had conquered not two moments before. Jesus shakes his head, walks over to Peter, and picks him out of the sea by his shirt collar. Shaking him out, he says: “Why did you doubt?”

I told you that you could walk on the water, and you did! Why did you doubt?

[In three weeks, our rector will stand in this pulpit and call us to action. He will speak to us of our obligation to engage fully with those ministries that make a difference in the life of our parish, in the life of our community, and in the lives of our young people. He will remind us that...]

Our Christian mandate is to heal the sick, mentor the young, and care for the poor. We are to do everything in our power – and many more things that are not within our power! – to peel back the veil that separates the city of man from the city of God. We are to breathe the breath of life into those parts of the world that know only death.

In six words, our charge is this, our charge is Christ’s: Bring near the kingdom of God.

At first, this charge may impossible. It is a bold commission and a daunting mandate. Our time is limited, our resources are stretched, and our strength has already worn thin. But, even as these words come out of my mouth, I can almost hear Jesus’ voice saying: Why do you doubt? I told you that you could do these things, and I showed you how. Why do you doubt?

Nothing is impossible for those who heed the call of Christ.⁵ Christ will empower us to do things that far exceed the pale of human strength. He will empower us to do things greater even than Christ, because he himself said that we could.

Come to me on the water, Peter. Come to me, and do not be afraid.

Amen.

⁵ Cf., Luke 1:37 (KJV)