

Have you ever started a project with high hopes of succeeding, but after you started and hit some difficulty your hopes fell? We will read that kind of story today and learn an important lesson. We are beginning in Matthew's gospel, chapter 14.

Matthew 14:13-21 (NIV) When Jesus heard what had happened, (King Herod executed John the Baptist) **he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.** (between seaside towns)
Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. (They could see the boat from shore and kept pace with it.)

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

"We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

"Bring them here to me," he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

This is my favorite miracle of Jesus. It reminds me of the circus. A very small car comes driving into the ring, stops, and a clown climbs out. Then another climbs out, and another, and another. You think there could only be 3 or 4 clowns, but 10 climb out, like a miracle. That's what this miracle of Jesus was like. The disciples have baskets of food, not a basket you drag behind you like the yellow recycle bins we all have. They are carrying a basket of bread and fish. They reach in and grab some and hand it to someone and look back, and there is a loaf right where they took the last one from. The people sitting near the front are thinking that soon the basket will run out and the people behind them won't get any. And the people in the back are thinking the same thing. Everyone is watching to see what happens when the food runs out. But it never does. The people are astounded.

Up to this point in time, Jesus had publicly performed only healing miracles. He healed diseases. He healed people of demon possession. Even more impressive was healing people of physical handicaps that were considered permanent. Sometimes people get well from diseases on their own or with medicines. But before Jesus came along no one who was blind got their sight back. No one who was deaf could suddenly hear. No one who's leg was shriveled could suddenly walk. Yet that was what happened when Jesus healed them. Yet even more amazing was this miracle of food multiplication. This got the people more excited than anything they had seen Jesus do yet.

Surely, many in that crowd of Jews, by this miracle, were reminded of Moses and the Israelites in the wilderness. God provided manna to miraculously feed the Israelites for 40 years. Not only did Jesus provide them with food. Matthew records that they were fully fed.

Matthew 14:20 (NIV) They all ate and were satisfied...

They were satisfied. They ate their fill. That was rare for many of them. Considering how poor and food insecure many people were, their reaction to this miracle is understandable. We read of their reaction in John's recording of the same event.

John 6:14-15 (NIV) After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."

Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

The people responded to THIS miracle by deciding to crown Jesus king and dare to start a revolt against Rome. Jesus' disciples were also ready to crown him king. They believed all along that Jesus would at some point move to claim the throne. They wanted this also. It may have been them, scattered in the crowd with their baskets of food, dropping hints of who Jesus must be and suggesting he be crowned king. Let's see how Jesus responds to this idea.

Matthew 14:22 (NIV) Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.

Jesus had to make them leave. The force of this word is more like constrain or compel. Jesus compelled them to leave. There was resistance on their part. They did not want to go.

You see the disciples were working on a different agenda than Jesus. Jesus' agenda included the cross. He had not revealed that to them yet. So, at times like this one he had to direct them away from what they wanted.

There is a lesson here for us. We each have an agenda for ourselves. We have a plan for our lives. We have desires, expectations, goals, hopes for how we want our life to play out. What we have to remember is that our lives belong to Jesus. What we have to learn is that Jesus has an agenda for us. As his followers we must surrender our lives to Him. I am sure there are times that Jesus has to do something drastic or allow something unfortunate into our lives to move us off our agenda and back onto his. For example, God may not have started the pandemic. But he can certainly use it to further his agenda.

What have your prayers been for this year? Have your prayers been about getting back to your agenda, your normal? Or have you seen this as an opportunity to change direction, a calling from the Lord to surrender yourself to his agenda? Maybe it is a reminder of who you are to be living for, no matter whether the circumstances of your life are good or bad.

Every event in your life calls for a faith response, a disciple response.

Let's go on.

Matthew 14:22-29 (NIV) Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified.

"It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

"Come," he said.

I think Jesus smiled when he said that. We don't know if he knew what would happen or not. But he is always pleased when we want to get in on what he is doing. Jesus smiled with joy that Peter asked to join him on the water.

So, Peter stepped over the side of the boat and looking at Jesus, walked on the water. We can only imagine what it felt like. Did it feel solid under him, or soft. The other disciples, none of whom tried walking on the water, may have been silent or oohing and aahing. Peter himself must have been thinking, "Wow, this is so cool!"

But the water and wind made themselves known. There were high waves. We know this because they had been trying to cross for most of the night. The wind was against them. Probably Peter's feet and ankles were getting wet. Water was soaking up into his robe. **His circumstances distracted his attention from Jesus.** We read what happened next.

Matthew 14:29-30 (NIV) But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

When he took his eyes off of Jesus and looked at his circumstances, the wind and waves, he moved his faith from Jesus to them and began to sink.

Ministry is like that. When I am focused on Jesus it can be great. When I take my eyes off of Jesus and see all that needs to be done and feel so inadequate, I begin to sink into despair. I am sure some of you have experienced that, especially you who teach a Bible study. Getting up here Sunday after Sunday is a terribly hard job if I look away from Jesus. And too often I do.

The same can be said about life in general for all of us. We all have good days and bad days. We have good days where we are focused on Jesus, days we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit. And we have bad days when we are focused on the difficulties facing us. We focus on our fears and inadequacies.

The news is full of things to cause us fear. The news is full of COVID cases, new strains, problems with the vaccines, arguing politicians, conspiracies, abuses, unrest, racism, sexism, ageism, the economic gap, pollution, and lots more. The news is full of cautions and warnings. Don't travel. Don't eat in restaurants. Stay masked. Stay 6 feet apart. Don't gather. Don't sing.

When we focus on the circumstances of our current lives, there is much reason to be afraid, even depressed. And when we are depressed, our natural inclination is NOT to go to the Lord. Instead, we are more likely to live defeated. We sink into despair.

Let's finish the passage.

Matthew 14:31-33 (NIV) Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Don't miss the miracle here. Peter was actually walking on the water. He was away from the boat. He was succeeding.

Then he took his eyes off of Jesus. He not only moved his focus from Jesus to the wind, he moved his faith from Jesus to the wind. He gave the wind more credit than it deserved and Jesus less faith than HE deserved.

It is exciting and very satisfying when we are a part of Jesus changing someone's life. And yet, so soon afterwards we drop back into a focus on our circumstances.

Yes, Peter succeeded and then failed. But at least he both desired to join Jesus and did so. He showed more desire and faith than those who did not want to get out of the boat.

Being in the boat is normal. There is a sense of security in the boat. **If you want to be with Jesus, you have to get out of the boat.** Staying in the boat revealed whose agenda the other disciples were focused on.

Are you ready to get out of the boat? Are you ready to surrender your life to whatever agenda Jesus has for you? It may or may not include any of the things on your agenda. It may or may not include marriage. It may or may not include a dream job. It may or may not include owning a home. It may or may not include good health. It may or may not include getting back to the normal you knew before.

But I urge you to get out of the boat of your agenda and surrender to his for you.