

Matthew 14:22-33  
August 13, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our family is not far removed from our vacation to the Gulf shores of Alabama. It was a calm and relaxing trip for the most part. However, just a week or so earlier only hours away in Panama City, Florida beachgoers encountered quite the opposite. A group of nine got caught up in a riptide and were in grave danger of being swept to sea and losing their lives. As bystanders in the water and upon shore hear the cries for help and saw the flailing arms of those struggling for life they formed a human chain, hand-in-hand of approximately 30 people that stretched into the water and to those nine people. One by one they were able to work together and create the stability and strength needed to withstand a similar fate of being caught up in the riptide and return all nine to safety on the sandy beach. Perhaps, a true miracle. Miracle or not, it made me wonder. Who were those 30 or so people that risked their own lives to come to the help of nine people they didn't know? Who were those nine people in the water? What similarities did they have to one another? What differences? What belief systems did they operate from? Were they Democrat or Republican? Were all citizens of this wonderful country we call home or were some visiting the

beautiful shores of Florida on vacation? We don't know but it is a given they had some things in common and some differences among them. Even we as the gathered people of Christ have our differences. Those things that separate us from one another.

What fascinates me is how none of that came into play in the split-second decision of these people to simply see another human person in need and then to respond. Differences of skin color, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, political party, class in society didn't make a difference. They simply acted because another person needed help. Another human being created just as they were was sinking amidst dangerous waters, crying out for help, and they came by their side, arm-in-arm, neighbor-to-neighbor, and for that moment nothing else mattered except rescuing those nine people and returning them to the safety of dry land with all gathered there that day.

Our world is in great need of more miracles such as this one. Of people setting aside judgements, stereotypes, and differences in an effort to help one another in times of need. Of people putting personal agendas on hold and simply responding out of love of neighbor who may be flailing in the storms of life. Of people willing to leave the safe confines of the warm, sandy beach and rush into the swirling waves that threaten to engulf another human being.

God knew the world God created was in need of this too, which is why God became incarnate of Jesus Christ. Emmanuel. God with us. This is why Jesus came to those frightened disciples whose small boat was being battered by the waves and said to them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." The world needed a Savior. God's people needed a Savior. We need a Savior. Matthew knew this as well as he carefully authored his account of the life of Jesus Christ approximately 50 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. His community was struggling. They were in fear of persecution because of their faith. They were probably wondering when Jesus would return. Was he going to come and save them from the storms of life the young church found itself caught up in? Would he hear their cries for help? Matthew wrote in response to those fears, struggles and very real threat of death. He wrote to calm those fears and assure the people Jesus was not absent. To give them the courage to push onward for the sake of the gospel. He wrote to recall the promise of Jesus applied then, to that community, just as it did to those first disciples, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." That promise holds true today as sure as it did then.

So many people love the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. The faithful people of God turn to it in times of need and in particular these beautiful words, "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your

staff—they comfort me.” (NRSV) Special attention needs to be paid to those five words, “For you are with me.” They are placed squarely in the middle of this Psalm with exactly the same amount of Hebrew words before and after. In similar fashion has Matthew placed this line of great comfort the world needs to continually be reminded of, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” I had not realized this before; until, I came across it this week. This line is found exactly in the middle. There are 28 chapters in Matthew and our passage this morning is from Chapter 14. And there is more. There are exactly 90 Greek words before and 90 Greek words after those spoken words of our Lord and Savior. Matthew’s emphasis in this miracle story and throughout his entire gospel becomes crystal clear – God is with us. In the midst of our storms – God is with us. In the midst of our darkest nights – God is with us.<sup>i</sup>

In a week that has been marked by increased tension, heightened words of war, and the very real threat of devastating military action among two nations how desperately we need to be assured of this promise. If that weren’t enough yesterday we watched in horror tensions explode and then a senseless act of violence we can’t comprehend. Acts such as this must be condoned on all levels from our church. As Christians, following the example of our Lord, there is no place for hatred and vengeance such as this in the face of our differences. Even in

the face of intolerance for our neighbor. We are called to action. We are called to love. We are called to pray. We are called to strive for peace. We are called to forgive. We are called to even pray for our enemy. We are called to see one another as human beings created in God's image and set aside our differences, look past those things that separate us, and stand arm-in-arm and let love rule the day. We are called to proclaim and live by these words, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." And so now we pray and if you will, hold hands with one another, as we truly reveal the fact we are united in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

Holy God, we pray for the continued faith and hope to trust you are present with us this morning and present in the tragedies that so often dominate the headlines. We pray for all nations. Often it seems the world sits on the edge of war and right now we pray for the leaders of both this nation in which we live and love and the leaders of North Korea. May diplomatic solutions be found and conflict which would leave many dead and wounded be avoided. We pray for the people of Charlottesville, Virginia. Draw near to all in need. We pray for the dead, wounded, and all grieving yet another heinous act of violence. In the midst of our conflicts and differences, help us to confront one another without hatred, bitterness, or violence and to listen to your voice amid competing claims. Heal hardened hearts to work together with mutual forbearance, love, and respect for one another. We pray for the family and perpetrator of this awful act. We pray for all who respond, hand-in-hand, alongside those injured and in fear and truly reveal your presence and help. All these things we lift to you in the name of our Lord, and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Fr. Bill Wigmore, "Walking on Water" sermon from <https://www.sermonwriter.com>