

Matthew 15:10-28
August 16, 2020

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

“Lord, have mercy” was all the young mother could offer in the waiting room of the hospital’s ER. The phone call no parent ever wants had come just minutes earlier and now she found herself alone as doctor’s urgently tended to the injuries suffered by her daughter following a car accident. So many unknowns at this point. What happened? Who was at fault? What is the extent of her injuries? Will she make it? Will she have permanent damage? She was found herself amidst one of the greatest storms of her life and all she could do in that moment was utter those three words, “Lord, have mercy.” It was all she had. All she could offer. All that could bring her peace. The presence of Jesus.

“Lord, save me.” “Lord, have mercy.” That is the prayer Peter offers as he begins to sink into the depths of the sea after taking his eyes off Jesus as he stepped out of the small boat the disciples found themselves in and began to walk on the water toward Jesus.

Again, today we hear that familiar prayer lifted to Jesus not once but twice. “Have mercy on me, Lord” and then “Lord, help me” as she too finds herself amidst the storm of suffering endured by her daughter. She comes with nothing but her prayer for help. Her eyes set on Jesus as the only one who can bring healing and wholeness, which he does. He hears her simple cry and he heals her daughter. He calms the storm she found herself in.

It has been a week we would just as soon forget. We experienced a great windstorm the likes none of us have ever witnessed before and hopefully will never experience again. Such widespread devastation. Huge, hundred-year-old trees snapped like toothpicks. Roofs ripped off. People still left without power. Our boats were shaken.

In so many ways, it seems the word of God as proclaimed and preached last week by Pastor Hougen seems so applicable today. And it is. Those words are the rock we cling to. The promise that Jesus enters our small boats, calms the storms we encounter, brings peace to whatever we are experiencing, is the promise that steadies our ships run amuck by waves of uncertainty and winds of hopelessness.

At times, in the moment, we simply do not know what to do. What to say. How to react. All we can do is utter perhaps the shortest, simplest prayer we encounter in the Bible, the living word of God, "Lord, have mercy." "Lord, save me." This prayer is the Spirit's gift to help us set our sights on Jesus. They are the words of the Spirit interceding for us when we cannot. When we have nothing else, no where else to turn, nothing to bring or offer, we have these words and we have the promised grace that Jesus will not leave us alone in our tiny boats caught amidst whatever storm it is we encounter. These three simple words, complete trust in Jesus, is the great faith the Spirit has equipped us with.

Some storms happen we just do not have answers as to why they have hit. Storms such as COVID-19. While other storms happen because of our actions. I created such a storm in my life when I was in ninth grade. I was now the big man on campus, so to speak, at my junior high school. It was time to take my place atop the pecking order and I was ready to grab hold of it. Perhaps it was pride that filled my heart. Perhaps arrogance. Perhaps ego. Perhaps just the false belief I was better than the lowly seventh graders who now roamed the halls. Whatever it was, it caused me to react in a way I was not proud of. In probably the third or fourth week of school I took my spot on the bus. At that time, it just was not cool to sit with a seventh-grade student, so I reserved the seat for a peer on equal footing as myself. As was so often the case, kids were racing onto the bus to secure the best seat and in so doing one seventh-grade boy was shoved into my seat and found himself falling onto the book bag I had placed in the open spot next to me.

I had a choice to make in that moment. Respond with grace. Or respond with something else. I chose the latter and I still remember the words, "Hey you moron, watch what you are doing." The look on the stunned boy's face quickly made me realize how much they hurt. Here he was, just trying to get his bearings

beneath him in a new school, to calm his anxiety of finding a seat on a crowded bus, and staggering for something to cling to perhaps amidst the storm each of us find ourselves in upon change.

I did not know this boy. Had no knowledge of his name. I assumed, because I did not recognize him that he must be a measly peon in the seventh grade. I never gave him a chance. I just lashed out in words that were far from the fruits of the Spirit. That young man did move on and found a seat; however, the entire ride home I felt ill. When I saw him on the bus the next day, I could not even look at him. I was so ashamed of my actions.

In that moment, through a few simple words, I created an internal storm that would blow within me for some time until years later that boy now a young man in high school gave me the words of grace to move on from the angst I found myself in. We became friends and I am forever grateful for the mercy he showed upon me.

In our small group that meets every Monday to discuss the upcoming Sunday's gospel passage, Pastor Hougen reminded us of a quote from Martin Luther in which he states, "You cannot keep birds from flying over your head but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair." Throughout the gospel of Matthew, Jesus has made it known there is an ongoing struggle between good and evil. We cannot avoid it. Yet, what often causes the most harm is how we react to those evil influences.

We cannot avoid all the storms that circle over our heads. We have no control over the evil that exists in our world. Yet, we can keep them from building a nest in our hair. We can choose to respond to hatred with hatred or we can choose to respond to hatred with love. We can choose to respond to gossip by spreading more gossip or we can choose to confront the gossiper and put an end to rumors that may be untrue and damaging to a fellow brother or sister in Christ. We can choose to tear another brother or sister down or we can choose to encourage and build them up.

Jesus gives us the answer to avoiding so many storms that rage in our lives. Look into our hearts that so often become so cold and so hardened and spew forth a virus that can do great damage not only to our neighbor but also to ourselves. At first glance it may seem Jesus is diminishing the law; but in all reality he is upholding the law that was given to the people of Israel as a gift. He is upholding the eighth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Luther unpacks this commandment in his teaching from his Small Catechism by writing, "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."

Over the last several weeks as we have heard the word of God. As we have heard of the miracles of Jesus and even as we have heard some of his most difficult teaching what we find in Him is that if we set our eyes on him, turn our hearts toward him, allow him into our tiny boats, his grace is made known and lavishly poured out upon us with no doing of our own. Even the smallest morsels of food that falls from his table are enough to sustain us. There is an abundance of Jesus' love to go round. Jesus is with us.

In a week like we have just gone through. A storm so violent. So devastating. So frightening. The church has a mission. We are called to bear witness to this Jesus who is in our boat. We are to be the light of Christ shining in the darkness. We are to spot his presence in the world and help bring to vision those unable to see it. We do not always know why storms hit; however, so often when they do, we see Jesus more clearly. We see our neighbor more clearly. We set our sights on Jesus more clearly because there is nothing else, we can do. Nowhere else to turn. All we can utter amidst so many of the storms is "Lord, have mercy."

Jesus has made himself known this past week. He has climbed into our boats with us. Neighbor after neighbor has come out of their house, even amidst a pandemic that tells us otherwise, and we have stood alongside one another. Perhaps donning our face masks or keeping our safe distance. In times such as this, we truly see we are in the boat together. We need each other. We need the saving presence of Jesus. He is our rock and our refuge. A very present help in times of

trouble. Jesus alone saves us from all the storms that wage in our lives; especially, the storm of sin that continues to fester in our hearts. When we come to the cross and pray, "Lord, have mercy" we are assured all is forgiven, we are saved, we are given new life through the amazing grace of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.