



August 13, 2017 - Going Solo or Common Boat Experience?

Given by Pastor Mattei

28 Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, *command* me to come to you on the water." 29 He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. 30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Mt 14)

Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright writes that what we see in this gospel "vignette" is a picture of the life of faith: "We are like the disciples in the boat. They had seen so much of Jesus' power. They had heard his teaching and prayed his prayer. But now they are stuck. Professional fishermen, they were struggling with the oars, unable to make headway against the wind. We too in our world have discovered so much, learned so much, invented so much, and yet are still without power to do many of the things that really matter. We have invented machines for making war, but nobody yet has found one that will make peace. We can put a man on the moon, but we can't put food into hungry stomachs. We can listen to the songs the whales sing on the ocean floor, but we can't hear the crying of human souls in the next street."¹

We, like the disciple, see Jesus doing the impossible and we get the idea that it would be good to copy him. In so many ways we like to follow him in details. No wonder the question "What Would Jesus Do?" has become so popular! Following in Jesus' footsteps does not mean replicating his historical answers to our modern challenges. It means living by faith in the Spirit of Jesus, being of the same mind of Christ, and incarnating the kingdom values that motivated him in our current story.

I wonder what prompted Peter to utter such a foolish request to be "commanded", no less, to come to him on water (not simply encouraged as a mother does by opening her arms to a child who has just learned to walk)? What prompted Peter to think that walking on rough water was going to be safer than staying in the boat? Did he think Jesus needed help walking on water? Or wasn't the boat good enough for him? Was the boat too tight for Peter? If the boat is the symbol of the Church, of community life,

¹ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, p. 190

could it be that at times we find it too tight for us also? Community life is not always nice and smooth, a place of comfort and camaraderie, a place where we share spiritual food and uplifting service. Community life is not only a place where we practice our faith and discover new skills. It is also a place where we live out the joy of having been found by the Lord and at the same time rejoice with others who have also found out how much God loves them. Community is the place where we become aware of our natural egocentricity and are helped to mature and grow into Christ-centricity. The process is painful: it requires much vulnerability and humility. It calls for self-examination, self-acceptance, self-forgiveness as well as asking for forgiveness from others and a determined willingness to pursue justice and work toward reconciliation. It requires personal death and trust in the resurrection. Our ego has its work cut out. But we are not alone. The Spirit of Jesus assists those who are open and willing. Individuals and whole communities are constantly in the renewal process.

I wonder what the other disciples thought of Peter when he stepped out of the boat. Is he crazy? Was he showing off? Displaying a truly great faith? Expecting them to do the same? Was Peter tempting Jesus, or God? What was Peter's business in the wind battered waters, Jesus was coming to them anyhow? Was he trying to escape the reality of a sinking boat? Was he looking for a better place, a safer place? Was he trying to affirm his leadership? Was he wanting to be seen as a courageous man? Exhort admiration? Was he getting no appreciation or no cooperation? What would be our personal motivation to get out of the boat? Any desire to jump ship now?

We know this kind of individualism all too well. A messianic belief that we can save the world by ourselves and a habitual self-reliance may drain our resources and push us straight into dangerous waters. Wanting to be there for others counting on our strength alone may be exhilarating but exhausting. Not wanting to ask or accept help when offered, refusing to listen and to cooperate may be sign of lack of humility and overestimation and perhaps even a sense of superiority.

When we get our eyes off of him and begin to sink, we have a better sense of how our dangerous choice has encouraged immature self-centeredness. We begin to drown (in self-pity, anger, disorientation?) and we are strongly tempted to give up. When we look at the overwhelming wind and waves we experience self-doubt and conclude that our personally assigned task is impossible. But help is only a step away. Jesus is merciful and full of grace, always ready to intervene and to give us second chances. Then we realize that the miracle is not so much walking on water. The true miracle is accepting Jesus' hand which guides us back to the boat, back to community, where with his presence the storm fades out. Sometimes faith is seeing the boat for what it is -- a shared experience and the opportunity to lean on one another, to encourage each other

in the storm while waiting on God. Peter was eager to leave his shipmates and to join Jesus, rather than to wait for Jesus to join them in the boat. There may be a personal faith but not an individual faith. Salvation is a community experience.

When the next storm arrives, ask yourself not WWJD but how you may best apply your trust in Jesus and love others through skillful listening and generous cooperation.