

WALKING ON WATER

Matthew 14: 13-33

Do you remember learning to ride a bike or learning to swim, or anything you learned that had first seemed insurmountable? You had to rely on someone holding your hand or holding you up and not letting go. You had to trust them completely. But then, at a certain point on the journey of learning, you had to let go. You had to trust in what you could do. Someone had believed in you and believed you could do this. Now you had to believe in yourself. Do you remember that moment you first realized you were doing it on your own? In that split second, you had to decide whether you would trust what was happening and what you could do, or you would give in to fear and fall or cry out for rescue.

One of the things we did as a family was Karate. I remember a certain point in the process learning to punch and kick. While we learned to do this using pads, we also did exercises called 'kata,' where the punching and kicking was in the air. I remember one class in particular when the sensei got everyone's attention. The dojo had just ordered in a bunch of wooden boards used for breaking. I had never punched or kicked through any hard surface like that before. He made everyone sit down. He picked five volunteers and gave them each a solid board. He showed them how to hold it and arranged them in different positions. Then he asked me to come forward. We were doing some kata and he told me that instead of punching and kicking into the air, I would punch and kick through these boards. My goodness! I could feel the adrenaline rush of fear flush through my body. Punching through a board would tear open my knuckles. Kicking through a board, I could break my toe or injure the ball of my foot. But the Sensei told me not to be afraid. He told me to have faith. He also told me not to hesitate but to punch and kick right through the board, otherwise I would get hurt. 'Don't hold back halfway,' he said. 'Punch and kick right through!' Wow! No pressure, huh! But he also told me he believed in me. I could totally do it. He had no doubts. He had seen my focus.

The whole thing took about 10 seconds. But as many of you would know when you're in the middle of some performance or action when your mind is racing, the adrenaline is flowing, and your heart is beating, and you can recall every single second and what you're thinking in that second. I remember the

moment I punched through that first board. It seemed so easy. No blood was spurting out of my hand. And then the second one. My toe was still intact. And then the third, fourth and fifth one. Wow! It felt so easy. Everyone clapped. The lesson here was that even though our training involved punching and kicking in the air, we should learn how to punch and kick as if we're doing it through boards.

OK, but what about real life outside the dojo. How about real life when we are faced with all kinds of challenges in our relationships, in our health, with our work, or with anything that demands we discover a faith that is bigger than our fear and doubt?

Let's zero in on our scripture reading. Our reading incorporates two stories traditionally called miracles. Both stories are also about faith, finding faith in the midst of fear and doubt. The reason they're called miracle stories is that something spectacular happens, something totally out of the ordinary, and if taken literally, something beyond natural or scientific explanation. The traditional word for this is 'supernatural.' The feeding of thousands of people with a few loaves and fish is supernatural. Peter walking on water, let alone Jesus walking on water is supernatural. If anyone tells us they have literally walked on water, we may suggest they seek some professional help and quickly.

The other problem with the traditional understanding of miracle is that people are passive recipients of the miracle with the active agent being some supernatural power, in this case, Jesus. Too often, this is how these stories have been read, interpreted and understood. And the lesson to be learned? Without Jesus or God you'll sink; you'll drown. Without Jesus or God, you'll starve. Without Jesus or God you are helpless and hopeless. What a way to build fearful dependence, eh?

But this, my friends, is not where the miracle is, and this is not how the supernatural energy that flows through Jesus works either. Why has Jesus called disciples? What happens every time Jesus heals or performs a 'miracle?' It's always about empowering and transforming people. The miracle is in how ordinary human beings can discover extraordinary possibilities in themselves, possibilities of healing, transformation and empowerment. Jesus is not simply interested in people having faith in him, but in how open and ready they are to believe in what can happen in and through them when they open themselves in faith to the Spirit-energy in Jesus

flowing into them. The healed then become healers. Those fed then feed others. Those who are empowered by one who walks on water, learn to walk on water themselves. The key, though, is faith, faith in Jesus, but then, faith in what the Spirit-energy in Jesus can do in and through them.

How does this work? What does it look like in real life? Let's zero in on our scripture readings.

The first thing to note is what it is that powers Jesus. Call it God or the divine if you like. But in our reading, God or the divine are linked to compassion. "When Jesus went ashore," we're told, "he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them..." That's what powers Jesus. That's what drives Jesus – compassion. Compassion is made up of two words – co-passion. Passion is not just about intense feeling or desire. In older English, passion also means suffering. Compassion means 'suffering-with.' It's certainly about empathy, but it's also bigger than just empathy. Empathy opens our heart to another, but unless we also open up our hearts to walk with another, care for another and even carry them for a time... we have not learned compassion. We are created for compassion. Jesus is driven by compassion. That's the heart of his divinity. Compassion in our hearts is the presence of God within.

OK, so back to this first miracle. What do you think is the miracle of the feeding of thousands. Is it some supernatural magic Jesus pulls off because he has supernatural powers? Or is the supernatural in his capacity to inspire compassion in others, others who are helpless and hopeless? It begins by engaging his disciples. Jesus doesn't go it alone. His goal is to teach his disciples the power of compassion to work miracles. But instead of just making them sit down and talking to them about compassion, his teaching is more hands-on learning. They need to learn the passion of compassion and generate it in others. The miracle here is how Jesus not only gets the disciples engaged in the work of compassion, but how they then work the crowds of people with the same inspiration. By sharing a few loaves and fish donated through compassionate generosity, others in the crowd get inspired and engaged. Those who have something give it up so that those who have nothing get something. The miracle is that a whole crowd of people are fed and there are still 12 baskets full. 12 is the number of the tribes of Israel. The message here: Jesus is starting a renewal movement within Israel, a new Israel renewed around love and compassion. The miracle is that all these people isolated and absorbed in their own problems and issues, their hate, indifference and despair, are awakened and energized to give and to share.

The disciples are activated to lead this process. Everyone is fed with lots left over. Body and soul are full. What a miracle!

So why is this so much greater a miracle than supernatural magic? Because just believing Jesus is God because he has supernatural power creates no change in people. People are passive recipients of food or healing but they themselves remain the same. They follow Jesus and obey him because of what they'll receive from him. But they themselves are not transformed. Faith is about opening a door to transformation. It's about empowerment in the face of the challenges, fears and doubts of life. It's about believing that the power of compassion can change not just us, but the world too. Jesus has come to change the world and to transform it through the love who is God. The miracle is in hearts open enough to believe in the power of compassion, overcoming the fear and the doubt in what's possible when God is working in and through us.

OK, but then we get to Peter. They're back in the water on their boats taking a break after a spectacular event they've all been a part of. It's now early morning the next day. The water is stormy. The waves are choppy. They see what appears to be a ghost. They "cry out in fear" we're told. Where are the ghosts in your life? What causes you the kind of fear that makes you cry out? Jesus tells them he is not a ghost. "Take heart, it is I", he says, "do not be afraid." What if we discerned the presence of God in our ghosts? What if we saw an opening to transformation in the face of our fears?

Well, Peter does take heart. He asks Jesus to call him out. He wants to dance with God and see what's possible. And so he does. He begins walking on water! Can you believe it? Can he? He does, for a bit, but then, the wind picks up and the waves get choppy. Fear comes at him full force. He starts to sink. He cries out to Jesus. Jesus extends his hand and catches him. But rather than comfort Peter and reassure him, he rebukes him: "You of little faith," he says, "why did you doubt."

So what's the lesson here? It's like punching through a wooden board. It's like feeding the crowds. Faith is not a momentary thing. Trusting God in Jesus, a God who is the energy-flow of love, is not just something you do here and there. You need to carry through. You need to go all the way. Empathic feelings need to be carried through into commitments and relationships of compassion.

And this brings me to us here and now, us here and now in the midst of a pandemic, us here and now as a community we call Armour Heights. We call ourselves a “faith” community. We claim to believe in God, the God revealed and embodied in Jesus. We claim that our identity and witness as believers and followers of this Jesus are in becoming his hands, feet and heart in the world. The miracle is in what divine compassion can do among us and through us in the world around us. As we receive and as we share with one another like the disciples, we extend it into the world around us as individual persons and as a community.

But like Peter, sometimes fear can undermine our faith in what we are doing and have yet to do. We may fear whether our good fortune financially will extend into the future. Can we keep doing what we’re doing and keep expanding and extending ourselves as we are? Should we not just be satisfied with where we’ve come and baton down the hatches as other churches struggle to keep their boats afloat? Should we just focus on our current members and consolidate our programs around the people who have already been a part of this community? Or is Jesus calling us to keep walking on water, keep renewing and enlarging our faith, keep punching through the boards, keep swimming through the water and the waves?

We have done some amazing things together in the last few years. This is part of a history that goes further back here at Armour Heights. But the pandemic has opened up all kinds of fearful realities and uncertainties. The waves are high. There are ghosts all around. But can we see Jesus calling to us to follow, to keep walking on water, to accomplish yet more, to explore yet further where divine compassion is calling us to go together as we collect different people with us on the journey in person and on-line?

How do you answer the call to faith? We’ve made a beginning. We’ve started walking on water. Let’s not lose our faith now and sink under the weight of our fears and doubts. Let us keep looking to Jesus and following where he is yet calling us to go. Amen.