

# Sermons at First Church

**A Ministry of the Word**  
**August 13, 2023**

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**Clarksburg, WV**

**Matthew 14:22-33**

*Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. (Matthew 14:22 N.R.S.V.)*

## Ordered Into the Storm

My senior year of seminary, I took a class entitled, “The Gifts of Silence.” As the name suggests, it was about prayer and spending quiet time with God. As a part of that class, we went to a Catholic retreat center for a weekend. During our time there we were asked not to talk to each other. Instead we were to seek time with God in the silence.

At one point I decided to go for a walk across the surrounding fields. It was January and the fields were covered with a thin layer of snow. As I walked, I came across a small frozen pond. Being young and foolish, I decided to walk out onto the ice. As I walked on the ice I thought to myself, “Wow, look at me, I’m walking on water!” No sooner had that thought entered my head than the ice began to pop and crack. I quickly scampered back off the ice. So much for my walking on the water.

Today’s scripture is about Jesus walking on the water and what happened to Peter when he tried to copy Jesus and walk on the water. It is a text that I have read many times. But this time I noticed that Jesus ordered the disciples into the storm.

Jesus has just finished feeding the 5,000. He is tired and the disciples are also tired. Jesus wants to spend some quiet time with God. So he tells the disciples to get into the boat and go to the other side of the lake. But wait! It doesn’t just say that he suggested that they go on ahead. It says that he “made” them get into the boat and go ahead. Jesus as fully God, must have known that a storm was coming. The disciples, some of whom were veteran fishermen, probably knew it too. Still, Jesus orders them into the boat and by extension, into the teeth of the storm.

Does that sound like the Jesus you know?

It is worth noting that we can read this story as a kind of parable about the church. The boat in this story can be seen as a metaphor for the church. This is not a new comparison. It has been suggested that if you look up at the roof of the church, it is kind of like looking down toward the keel of a ship. Many pulpits are made to resemble the prow of a ship - a reminder of Jesus teaching the crowds from the prow of a fishing vessel. Also our word “fellowship,” comes from

the idea that we are all fellows in the same ship.

What is different about this text is the idea that Jesus would order the ship or the church or the disciples into dangerous waters. In Biblical thought, the sea represented chaos, confusion, and destruction. That is why we read in Revelation 21:1 about the end of time, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and **the sea** was no more.” The sea was no more - no more chaos, confusion, and destruction.

But that is at the end of time. Right now we have plenty of chaos, confusion, and destruction around us.

Let me get back to this idea that Jesus would order the church and his disciples into dangerous waters. Does that fit with your image of who Jesus is?

It has been suggested that the main question that the writer of Matthew is trying to answer is, “Who is Jesus?” Matthew begins by saying that Jesus is Emanuel - God with us. Matthew reveals Jesus as a miracle maker, but also as a rule-breaker and a risk taker. This comes as a bit of a shock to many of us.

Wil Willimon tells about a time he preached on Luke 9:57-60 where Jesus speaks to his would-be followers. When one man begs off from following Jesus in order to go bury his father, Jesus says, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

After the service one of his parishioners said to him, “My Jesus would never say something like that.” We get where the parishioner was coming from. This makes Jesus sound rude and insensitive. After all this man had just lost his father.

It is interesting though, how this objection is phrased, “My Jesus would never say something like that.” “My Jesus,” that is the Jesus that I have captured in my mind. “My Jesus” the way that I want Jesus to be. Most of us have no trouble picturing Jesus as being ultimate love. We see him as being caring, loving, healing, and encouraging. But this image of Jesus as commanding us into dangerous waters - that breaks the mold.

Here is the thing, we human beings don’t get to limit Jesus or define who he must be. Instead we are called to follow him wherever he leads us - even into dangerous waters. In answer to the question, “Who is Jesus?” Matthew tells us that Jesus is the one who commands us to be risk takers.

Notice that in our text, none of what happens is the disciples’ idea. Jesus commands them to sail off into the storm. But then in the midst of the storm, Jesus comes to them, impossibly walking on the water. They didn’t call for him to come help them. He simply comes. It is his idea. He is in charge all the way.

Now, look at what Peter says. The disciples don’t recognize Jesus as he comes to them across

the water. They think he is a ghost and scream like little girls. Okay, it doesn't say they scream like little girls, but it does say that they were "terrified." Jesus tells them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

There must have still been some doubt. Peter challenges Jesus, "If it is really you, prove it." If this were a spy movie, Peter would have asked for the password of the day. But this was not a spy movie and there was no password. So how were the disciples to know if it was really Jesus?

Jack Anderson told me that he once got a scam call from someone claiming to be his grandson. The caller said that he needed money to post bond and that he didn't want his parents to know about this. Jack said the caller did kind of sound like his grandson, but when he started questioning him about things that only his grandson would know, the caller let loose a string of cusses and said "Blankty blank, just send me the money grandpa." Jack said, he knew then that it was not his grandson, because his grandson would not cuss like that.

So what was it that Peter wanted from Jesus to prove that he was who he said he was? Peter said, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Isn't that interesting? Peter said, command me to do something outrageous and risky and I'll know it is you! Peter knows that it was Jesus who sent them into dangerous waters to start with. So now he asks that Jesus command something even more risky. Isn't that interesting?

Jesus says, "Come on then." And so Peter starts out walking on the water. Everything is fine until Peter takes his eyes off of Jesus and starts looking at the dangerous chaos of the wind and the waves. Then he starts to sink. So he calls out to Jesus and Jesus saves him.

I could talk about how we need to keep our eyes on Jesus rather than looking at the size of the problem we are facing. That is great advice, but that will have to be a sermon for another day.

For today, I want to focus on how we know that it is Jesus who is calling us. Both churches and individuals tend to be risk adverse. We aren't comfortable with risking. We don't want to go too far out on a limb for anyone. We would rather play it safe.

Yet, just as boats aren't meant to stay on the shore. So the church is not meant to stay huddled within the four safe walls of our building. We know that we are following Jesus when he calls us to move out of our comfort zone. We know it is Jesus when we find ourselves doing things we thought we couldn't do.

Lord, if it is you, command me to do something about the bully that is pushing everyone around at school. If you command me, I'll know it is you.

Lord, if it is you, command me to speak out at the Board of Education meeting so that all of our students get a fair education no matter what some may say. If you command me, I'll know it is you.

Willimon shares this story from a woman he knows.

*“All the more amazing,” she said, “is that, as you probably know. I’m the sort of person who really doesn’t like conflict. I’m a hard core people pleaser. Still there I was, there we were, a little group of church people standing up to the city council, arguing that their new laws about the homeless just weren’t right.”*

*Willimon says that he did indeed know her as a soft spoken person whose nature was to be gracious and kind in all her interactions.*

*“I even gave a little speech - and you know how I despise being up in front of people.”*

*So what got into her that she was suddenly so outspoken on behalf of others? Willimon believes that it was Jesus. She dared to venture forth, to walk on water as it were because Jesus called her. (Pulpit Resources, August 13, 2023 pg. 23)*

As we go to silent prayer, what is Jesus calling you and me and this church to do?

Amen.