

Pressing On

Hebrews 12:1-4, 12-13; Matthew 14: 22-33

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (August 9), 2020

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(Sermon upon my 31st Anniversary as Pastor of Austin Heights Baptist Church)

*Well I'm pressing on. Yes, I'm pressing on. Well I'm pressing on
To the higher calling of my Lord.*

- Bob Dylan

Three weeks we ago on July 17 we lost two of the great prophets of our history, two extraordinary Christians of our faith: Congressman John Lewis and Dr. C.T. Vivian. They first became friends in Nashville in 1960 when they both participated in the Sit-In Movement after being trained by Rev. James Lawson. Both Lewis and Vivian were giants to me.

Of the two, Vivian was not as well-known but his close friend and associate Martin Luther King, Jr. called C.T. Vivian the “greatest preacher ever to live.” I never heard Dr. Vivian preach but I did meet him a couple of times back in 1985 when I was in Atlanta working for the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, doing peace and justice work, and working with homeless people. He was warm and approachable. And he had the respect, authority, and credibility that only someone who has been in the struggle for racial justice for a long time, could have. Look up on YouTube sometime the video of C.T. Vivian in 1965 speaking about the right to vote to Selma, Alabama Sheriff Jim Clark. Clark suddenly knocks

Vivian down. Vivian gets up, and never misses a beat, continues to talk about the right to vote.

Once I was in a meeting when C.T. Vivian came in. We were all young activists, mostly White, with our beards, flannel shirts, jeans, and hiking boots. Usually, we began our meetings with a moment of silence. But when Dr. Vivian came in wearing a suit and carrying his Bible, we stood in respect and ask him to lead us in a word of prayer. No moment of silence would do. He knelt at his folding chair, put his Bible in the seat, and bowed his head and began to pray a prayer that started low and slow but built. He took his time. Dr. Vivian knew we needed deep prayer. He knew we needed the Living God because we were going up against Principalities and Powers of hatred, racism, and violence. He prayed and prayed and toward the end began to shout, “O God, we need you! Without you we cannot make it! For the battle is hard and the journey is long! Amen!”

That was 35 years ago, and I’ve never forgotten that prayer. 31 years ago, today, Jane and I joined Austin Heights Baptist Church and that prayer has kept me rooted because over these years, we have learned that the battle is hard and the journey is long. Now, more than ever, we cannot make it without the Living God.

In our Scripture story from Matthew today, I think the disciples learned to pray a version of this same prayer.

After feeding over 5,000 men, plus women, and children, Jesus sends the disciples on ahead to the other side of the Sea of Galilee by boat, while he goes off

alone to pray. Later that night, when the disciples are out on the sea, a storm comes up, wind blowing, rain, waves threatening to swamp the boat. The disciples are terrified.

For Matthew's readers, and for us, here is a story of the church in the middle of a storm. Not a big church, not a powerful church, but a rag-tag church rowing, struggling, trying with all their might to get to the other side. But they're losing. They're taking on water. The wind is against them, yet, they press on. After all, Jesus told them he would meet them on the other side, so they don't give up, they press on.

They're up against a lot. Darkness, water, wind, and chaos are the forces that God pushed back when the earth was created in Genesis chapter one. So, when storms come, they are the very forces of the deep erupting into creation. God's reign over the world is being contested. Chaos impinges on creation.

But the church learned over the centuries, especially from the great mystics of the faith, that the storms erupt not just outside of us, they also erupt inside of us. Disciples in the church's small boat can be swamped by chaos but also by fear and anxiety that threaten to overwhelm us. We can become exhausted and give into despair by all sorts of storms.

Meteorologists tell us we are in the beginning of a very busy hurricane season. Matthew tells us we are in the middle of a stormy season: COVID-19, racism, marches and protests, police brutality, nationalists toting guns, job

insecurity, cancer, chronic illness, trying to raise children while working from home, do we send our children to school or not, those of us who are teachers are scared and torn – we care for students but we do not think our schools are safe, we're tired from worry, we're tired from learning to change, adjust, figure out what the “new normal” is and then just as we start adjust, there is another “new normal.” Storms are exhausting. And we're all in a storm. And we all have storms inside of us.

This storm has been going on throughout the night. The boat has been taking on water and things look bad. Early in the morning hours, the hours when things seem most bleak and when despair rears its ugly head, comes Jesus. He comes walking across the water to the fear-filled and exhausted disciples. They see him coming toward them and they cry out all the more, not sure if it is him or a ghost. The storm scares them, and Jesus scares them and Jesus calls to them, “Don't be afraid. Take courage.”

Take courage. In the middle of the storm, Jesus comes to us.

What happens next is really strange. Peter, good old impulsive, impetuous, spontaneous Peter, cries out, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” (v. 28).

Jesus says, “Okay, come on.” And Peter climbs overboard and takes a few steps on the water, all the while keeping his eyes on Jesus. But the wind is blowing in his face, the waves are hitting him, and he takes his eyes from Jesus and looks

down. And Peter, whom Jesus had called “the Rock” goes down like a rock.

Of course, those of us who’ve been hearing this story for years and years know that it is Peter’s amazing faith, his extraordinary trust in Jesus which compelled him to jump out of the boat and into the storm. And all of this is true.

But the rest of the story is that he didn’t have quite enough faith. In fact, if we look back at what Peter said before he got out of the boat, we have a clue to the kind of faith Peter had. When Jesus was first seen walking toward them, Peter cried out, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” (v. 28).

“Lord, if . . .” How many times have we heard that? Or how many times have we said it ourselves? “Lord, if . . . if you are the Son of God and can do anything for us that we want, call me out on the water and prove it to me.” “Lord, if you are the Son of God, prove it to me by pulling my fat out of the fire this time.” “Lord, if you are the Son of God, show me how great you are. Let’s just see how much of a Son of God you are.”

Maybe Peter is also saying, “Lord, I’m the leading disciple, the real rock of the church as you have said. While the others sit back and worry, I’m a hero. I’m an idealist who really believes that you call us to taking big steps of faith and I’m taking the risk of faith and stepping out of the boat.”

Jesus would have been utterly justified in saying, “Peter, lighten up! You’re one of disciples. Forget the heroics and get back in the boat.”

Jesus doesn't do that. Jesus is patient, even if Peter is not. And maybe Jesus knows what Peter really needs. So, Jesus says, "Okay Peter. Come on." Peter ventures out, "Lord, look at me! I'm walking on water!" Then he begins to sink, and he changes to "Lord, save me! I'm sinking. What am I doing out here? Oh no! I can't believe how stupid I am! Save me!"

Maybe that's all Peter needed to know and what Jesus needed to hear. "Lord, save me. Lord, I can't do this no matter how much faith I have." "Help me, please, Lord."

And Jesus does save him. He says, "O Little Faith." It is usually translated, "Oh, you of little faith." But it could be translated as if Jesus is renaming Peter. He was called "The Rock," and now he's "Little Faith." As in, "Little Faith, why did you doubt?"

I don't know but I wonder about Peter's doubt. Maybe it was not so much the doubt which he had once he felt the wind and waves. Maybe his doubt was in his demand of Jesus in the first place. "Little Faith, why didn't you have enough faith to stay seated in the boat with the others and let me come to you? Why didn't you wait on me and my timing instead of you trying to come to me on your timing?" "Peter, why didn't you trust me to come to you in the storm and get in the boat with you? You've got to learn to wait in the boat. I'll be with you. I'll always be with you in the storms."

Note that Jesus only rebukes Peter for his lack of faith. To the others, who stayed in the boat, who didn't attempt Peter's spectacular spirituality, Jesus just comes. He gets into the boat with them. And there is a great calm as the storm ends.

What if great faith, perhaps even a greater faith than walking on water, is the faith to stay in the boat? What if we're called to be patient, learning to wait on Jesus? What if discipleship is the un-heroic but solid conviction that keeps us in the boat, rowing, bailing the water, pressing on, and encouraging the other disciples, and all in the middle of the storm? Perhaps great faith is that patient trust that we don't have to come to Jesus. In God's good time, at the right time, he'll come to us.

There are times for heroic risks but let's not confuse heroic risks for impatience and our habits of not being able to sit and wait. We love the get-it-done multi-tasker and we are among those who, when asked "How are you?" our answer is "Busy."

We also love to be in control and patience is about giving up control. Of course, storms remind us that we're not in control and for most of us, learning patience in the middle of a storm is pretty hard to do. The time to start practicing patience is when the sea is calm. We practice in little things before we practice it in the big things.

Furthermore, lest you think I'm suggesting we should not be courageous;

think again. The courageous church gets in the boat, rows to the other side in the middle of storms. Meanwhile, there are hundreds of churches sitting in the safe harbors, anchors down, while looking to see if the storms will pass or not and debating whether or not they should venture out into the deep water far from shore.

So, in our context, perhaps the gospel word for us is not so much how we need to be more like Peter and how we should have the kind of faith which walks on water. Perhaps the gospel for us is to learn to stay in the boat, with patient trust that waits for Christ to come and be with us. And with patient and persevering trust we keep rowing. The battle is hard, and the journey is long, but we press on.

Christ calls us to be faithful. Just do what he tells us. Trust him; not ourselves, not our power, not our control.

Matthew says that Jesus said simply, “Hush!” to the waves. And they do. And at that moment, when all is strangely still, when all is quiet and the storm has passed, that’s when we are able to say, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Will Campbell knew John Lewis when Congressman Lewis was only 20 years old. Lewis was in Nashville being trained by James Lawson to do Sit-Ins and integrate not only lunch counters but other places like movie theaters. Will Campbell, a white Baptist minister, was helping with some of the training. John Lewis and other young people like Bernard Lafayette, Diane Nash, and C.T. Vivian were discussing and planning a march for the next day. Journalist David Halberstam wrote later that many called them, “the Children,” they were all so

young, but no matter what, they were going to march. Already they had encountered strong hostility from White crowds and White policemen. Tomorrow was going to be rough. Will Campbell was worried for these young people.

Will Campbell told me that he explained to the group that it was going to be dangerous tomorrow, and he asked John Lewis, who was the leader, “What do you think, John?” Lewis said, “We’re gonna march.” Will was emphatic, “John tomorrow is going to be bad. The police are just as bad as the mobs. And the mobs are going to larger. You’ll likely be arrested. Someone will get hurt.” John said, “We’re gonna march.” Will said he got mad. “John, you’re agreeing with all of us that tomorrow there will be very serious violence if you all have another protest, and all you can say is, ‘we’re gonna march!’” Will raised his voice, “John, I think this has come down to your own pride! This is about your stubbornness, your own sin!” John Lewis looked right at Will and calmly said, “Then I’m a sinner... but we’re gonna march.”

Will said, “That’s when I realized it was not stubbornness or pride. John Lewis was more determined and more courageous than anyone I had ever met. And John Lewis knew he was called by God to march” (Based upon personal conversation with Will Campbell. Also cited in John Lewis’ *Walking with the Wind*, and his *March: Book Two*).

Jesus told the disciples to go the other side. He called them. He called us. We are called to be faithful to Christ, no matter what. Storms and chaos erupt on the way. Our boat might be flooded. We’re afraid and we’re tired. Who knows

what else is in front of us in this chaos or how long it will last or how many more storms we will face? The battle is hard, and the journey is long.

But we're gonna march.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.