

August 13, 2017
Matthew 14:22-33; Romans 10:5-15

The last year has brought political and social crisis to our country and world. While I don't think of myself as a particularly political preacher, the headlines found ways into my sermons. I couldn't escape them. And though I wish they had been positive examples of Americans and Christians and Presbyterians working together, most of these examples have been storms in our lives. Most of these were examples of hatred and fear run amok – anti-Muslim rhetoric and persecution, homophobic discrimination, anti-immigrant legislation, and other such racist, bigoted, fear-mongering actions. As Christians, we cannot separate the news from what we believe, but instead, hold ourselves accountable to what happens in the world around us. “Read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other,” theologian Karl Barth said. The Bible is a tool for finding the presence of God (or the need of God's presence) in the world. Like a magnifying glass, the Bible reminds us what God is like. It points to the places where God is at work today, in the same ways that God was at work a long time ago. So when we read the newspaper, or talk about it in church, we are not telling stories for the sake of stories, but trying to see God more clearly, to come to know God better, and to draw closer to God. In doing so, we should be compelled to respond to God's presence in the world – spurred to action for the sake of the Gospel.

Today we return to Matthew's Gospel, which continues last week's story. Jesus was tired. In the hopes of finding rest, he separated himself from the disciples and the crowds. After he sent the disciples ahead of him, across the lake in a boat, he went up the mountain to pray by himself. (a reversal from last week's story) The night became windy and stormy and pushed the disciples' boat away from land. Jesus walked on water to get them, but they thought he was a ghost.

Strangely, they were not scared of the storm, but were terrified of this ghost (Jesus) approaching the boat. When Jesus got into the boat, the wind ceased, and they worshipped him.

That is our magnifying glass. Now let's take out the weekend edition of the newspaper.

Our country is living in an uneasy time. If there was a season of peace and tranquility, it is gone. If there was a time when we all got along, or at least 'made do,' it is gone. Perhaps it is for the better? Perhaps it is good that we see the ways that we are hurting, and the places and people and issues that need tending? It is ugly and raw and painful to see our true colors on display.

The people of Charlottesville, Virginia saw a terrifying and horrifying display this weekend. No doubt, you heard about the huge gathering of white nationalists and other extremist groups who took over the town. Groups marched while shouting things like, "white lives matter" and "you will not replace us." Most of the protesters were young adult, white men. Some of the protesters dared to hold or wear crosses, as if they were speaking with God's words or intentions. They created a storm of words and motives.

In the face of such hatred, people in Charlottesville united. Pastors reached across denominational and theological lines. Congregations worshipped together in one another's sanctuaries. Jews attended Christian worship services. Christians attended Islamic prayers. They all put themselves together. In the same boat. United against the protesters who stormed into their city. United with the God whom we love and serve, who reminded us in today's Romans reading that "there is no distinction between Jew or Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all..." We are all the same. Those inside the family and those outside the family. "There is no distinction; the same Lord is Lord of all." The faithful people of Charlottesville put this into practice as they stood together – literally arm-in-arm with one another – while the white supremacists marched

past. They had been warned of physical violence and brutality directed at them. They knew that their singing “This Little Light of Mine” would be drowned out by protesters’ drums and chants and heavy feet. Yet, they showed up. They stayed. They bravely banded together and stared into the eye of the storm. One of my friends, Rev. Liz Forney, was powerfully photographed with eyes steeled and chin juttied out – daring anyone to break their chain. A dangerous, edgy, scary thing to do and place to be. And while they banded together, there was “no distinction between Jew or Greek.” The Lutheran pastor looked the same as the Presbyterian who could have been the Jewish Rabbi who might have been the Muslim Imam. “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

The faithful people of Charlottesville put themselves together in the same boat. United against the protesters and united with the God whom we love and serve, they steeled their eyes against the storm, unafraid to see God in a dangerous place. Unafraid even to go to Christ standing in stormy waters. They boldly demonstrated the good news in a beautiful new way.

Karl Barth, the same theologian, who encouraged Christians to read the Bible and the newspaper together, also wrote, “People who have no fear are those who are fully open to the troubles and needs of their fellow human beings and to the question of how they can be of assistance.”¹ So the people of Charlottesville got in the boat together, to preach the gospel of peace, and to be of assistance to their friends and neighbors. They did not read the news and sit idly by when those in opposition to the Gospel marched into town. Those faithful people did not ignore the news or run away, but saw Jesus calling to them from the midst of the storm, to come and join him in treacherous waters.

¹ Barth, *Insights*, “Fearless” chapter

Barth also said, “What should we do, so that the nations will really want peace?... We should not have so much fear – namely about the evil intentions of others.”² The jazz musician, Daryl Davis, heeded these words and courageously walked into treacherous water. A black man himself, he never understood the racism he experienced himself, so he set out to change things. He said, “There are a lot of well-meaning white liberals. And a lot of well-meaning black liberals, but you know what? When all they do is sit around and preach to the choir it does absolutely no good. If you're not a racist it doesn't do any good for me to meet with *you* and sit around and talk about how bad racism is.”³ So Davis started approaching members of the Ku Klux Klan in his home state of Maryland. He met with individuals and one by one, through simple and challenging conversations, showed them another way. As a black man, this was a dangerous thing to do. He received threats from white and black people alike. But he kept at it. To date, he has the robes of more than 25 former Klansmen⁴ who were converted in his conversation. Davis preached the gospel of peace. He saw Jesus calling from the midst of the storm, and joined him in treacherous waters.

Racism is sin. It swirls in the water underneath our feet. Violence is sin. It gusts through the air around us. White supremacy is sin. It seeps into the corners of our national rhetoric. We must listen to Jesus calling from the midst of the storm, and go and join him, despite the treacherous waters. We cannot read the news and say, “but it wasn’t on Long Island” or “I don’t know anyone a part of that” or other absurd things. It is on Long Island, and you definitely know people who are part of this. From small ways in the words we use, to larger ways in the neighborhoods we live, and the streets we drive (or refuse to drive). We are part of this story

² Barth, *Insights*, “Fearless” chapter

³ *The Atlantic*, “The Audacity of Talking about Race with the Ku Klux Klan,” by Conor Friedersdorf. Mar. 27, 2015.

⁴ Documentary “Accidental Courtesy”

because there are hate groups on Long Island, two of which are active chapters of the Ku Klux Klan (in Hempstead and Hampton Bays). Unless we speak up and speak out, we are complicit in our guilt. We need to remind ourselves and our neighbors that it is sinful to make remarks about “Asian drivers” or “Latino/Latina hospitality workers.” It is sinful to refuse to care for Muslim refugees. It is sinful to tell and laugh at jokes that further divide the body of Christ. There is neither us nor them, neither Jew nor Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all. This story, “*their*” story is **our** story because we are Christians. We are one with the faithful people in Charlottesville. We are all in the boat, boldly staring into the winds of hatred and fear. And we must respond to Christ who calls us into the storm.

Margaret Aymer, New Testament professor at Austin Theological Seminary: “Jesus doesn’t calm the wind when he’s walking out to his students in the boat. Jesus doesn’t calm the wind when he commands Peter to come to him. Jesus doesn’t calm the wind when he saves Peter from drowning. Jesus stands in the middle of danger, on the water, with the wind blowing and commands his students: Take courage. I am. Fear not. In the face of the winds of white supremacy and racism, with the seas of church decline roiling beneath your feet, we are still commanded to walk on water... In the face of ‘make nice’ culture and fear of offending, we are still required to face into the winds with the truth that racism is sin. We are still commanded: Take courage. Jesus Christ is Lord. Fear not.”

We must get in the boat together, undeterred by whatever storms are in our path. We must pray – fervently – that we will have courage to step out into the storm, responding to Christ’s call. We cannot wait out the storm. We cannot pretend that this isn’t happening. We must do something in response to these events. Take courage. Jesus Christ is Lord. Fear not.