

13th Week after Pentecost, Proper 14 – Year A – August 13, 2008 - Homily
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33
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When I was growing up, a staple of Sunday afternoon and late night English TV was a seemingly endless series of black and white war movies featuring great names like Jack Hawkins and Virginia McKenna who both starred in the 1952 movie *The Cruel Sea*. More recently, movies like the 1997 release of *Titanic* starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, or the 2000 release of *The Perfect Storm* with George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg have simultaneously scared and excited us with superb effects and great acting. Having spent many summers by the sea in England, I have always had a kind of love-fear relationship with such imposing bodies of water. Perhaps more aptly I should say I have healthy respect for the sea's incredible power, coupled with great joy and love of being able to take fun boat trips or go snorkeling.

The Sea of Galilee is about 13 miles long and 8 miles wide, and still has the kind of storms that arise quickly and are just as terrifying as the one in our Gospel story tonight. Apparently, the reason for the storms is geological: the Sea of Galilee is the lowest body of fresh water on earth; it sits in a rift valley; and is surrounded by hills.

In Biblical terms, the sea symbolically represents chaos. In the Book of Genesis, God's activities in and of creation tell us that "darkness covered the face of the deep", and God gathers the waters out of the darkness of chaos, separating them from the land, before calling it "good". In the Book of Revelation (21:1) telling of the Good News of Jesus' return to the world in the end times, "the sea was no more". That is not literally the end of all the beauty and joy of oceans and seas, but a prophecy of the end of all chaos, as the Prince of Peace comes to reign on earth.

Therefore, we should not be surprised that the Son of God has power to calm the storms of nature and to walk above the chaos. In fact, the Book of Job (9:8) prophesies that this is precisely what is expected of the Messiah: "who alone stretched out the heavens and trampled the waves of the Sea." In this respect then, we too join with the disciples who worship Jesus after he has stilled the storm and got into the boat, with the same words, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Now let's turn our attention to the fun part, which is of course, Peter's gravity-defying challenge to Jesus to command him also to walk on water. Peter is the one who represents all the disciples -- then and now -- in constantly testing the limits of Jesus' patience, and yet also affirming Him as the Messiah. I'd love to say that there is no Peter in me whatsoever, but that really wouldn't be true. I hope I'm not alone! In the same way as Peter's, my rationality would also have gotten the better of me if I had seen Jesus walking across the sea towards the boat. No wonder Peter asks Jesus to command him to walk on the water. Seeing is not always believing, but doing can get us there, when we can't believe what we see. Well, almost. While Peter is focused on Jesus he does not sink, but the moment he notices the strong winds and waves he becomes frightened.

There's a lot of fear in this Gospel reading, and a lot of assurance from Jesus that in His presence and care, there is no need to fear. Notice how Jesus links Peter's fear with small faith and doubt. In the Gospel of Matthew it is not that Jesus' disciples have no faith, but that they are still questioning in their hearts, because they are not one hundred percent sure whether Jesus is the real deal or not. Elsewhere in the Gospels, we learn that even faith the size of a mustard seed is more than enough, so what can Jesus mean here? Perhaps Jesus wants Peter to know that his little faith has left space in his heart for fear to creep in. Consequently, Peter, like you and me, finds that any room we have in our hearts that is not dedicated to the Lord, can all too easily be filled with fear, truly a worldly product. I'm sure you've noticed that as much as there are good, wonderful and beautiful things about this world, it is at times also very scary and violent. Yet as we have learned, fear is the antithesis of God's perfect love.

On the other hand, maybe the gift to Peter and to you and me is something else. Let's look at

the event of the water walking in this way. Peter managed to sustain his focus one hundred percent on the Lord for a short time, before the physical reality of the wind and waves distracted him in his world, just as the storms of life frequently do in our own. Nonetheless, he did do it. He got out of the boat and walked on water, just like Jesus. He did it! The kind of faith and love of the Lord that allows us to perform incredible miracles can be done. We even have the proof today, if we are willing to recognize the author. There are miracles of healing and deliverance through our prayers. There are miracles of love in sharing our time, our gifts and our resources to those in need of comfort and strength, and on and on. Then there are the small miracles of life, and I know that you have miracle stories of your own to share, both big and small. Here's a small miracle that happened to Steve and I just the other day. We went for a drive looking for a good spot to take our dog, Abby, for a walk. As the rough road we were on became too bumpy, we pulled over and decided to walk for a while. Then we saw a nice looking track and took that, purely on chance. Not far down, we came across a recently abandoned campfire. While most of it was covered in sand, a large log was still smoldering and smoking. In a place surrounded by trees, that isn't good, so we took care of dampening that fire. What are the chances of that? It seemed to us that God had put us right where we needed to be at the right time that morning. Take stock of your life this week and think about all the occasions that seem like coincidences, but are really God-incidences. I think you'll be amazed at all the miracles in your life.

Peter walks on water. For just a few moments, he knows what it is to have Christ-like power. Peter's hope rests in Christ. Our hope also rests in Christ and the promise of our Baptismal Covenant. Day-by-day in the power of the Holy Spirit you and I are being transformed into Christ-likeness. That means that by God's grace and our faith in Jesus, we too have many of the powers He showed us, including the gift of God's love to help us draw others to our Lord. As we continue our journey of transformation, we grow into the fruits of the Holy Spirit that help us to live even more in Christ-likeness. These are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Jesus truly is the Son of God, and we too must worship and adore Him, and only Jesus can fill our hearts with love, drive out all fear, and calm the storm of our worldly lives.

Amen.