

Proper 14-A
August 10, 2008
Mat. 14:22-33

Fr. Molison's Sermon
"Required: Faith to Get Out of the Boat!"

It is hard to believe that it was some 30 years ago that our family was camping on Wellesley Island in the 1,000 Islands. We had an excellent campsite, complete with a beautiful view of the St. Lawrence River.

On one particular day, my son, Steve, and I took the canoe out for a tour of the area. We paddled our way into Eel Bay, which is a wide and quite shallow body of water. Being in shallow open water, it does not take much for the wind to create good-sized waves. Paddling into the bay was easy as the wind was to our backs. However, paddling out was a different story. There we were, in the middle of the bay, challenging waves coming directly at us, some large enough to roll over the bow and into the canoe. For a powerboat, such waves would be no trouble at all. But, for two in a canoe, and one being only a nine-year-old lightweight, such open and turbulent waters provided quite a challenge. Try as we might, the only way we found to make any headway at all was to keep the bow of the canoe directly into the wind – which proved to be a formidable task indeed. Just when we thought we were making some headway, along came a gust of wind that would change our heading. The blowing wind would then catch the broadside of the canoe and send us further back than where we started. With very strenuous paddling, we would get back on course and start the process all over again. Needless to say, it took us quite some time before we are able to get back. By the grace of God, we safely returned to the campsite, a very tired and hungry two some. That was some day for us.

Charles Swindoll, in his book, "Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back," tells the story of a farmer who wanted to impress his hunting buddies. So, he bought the smartest, most expensive hunting dog he could find. He trained this dog to do things no other dog on earth could do... impossible things that would surely amaze everyone. Then he invited his buddies to go duck hunting

with him. After a while, a group of ducks flew over and the hunters were able to make a few hits. Several ducks fell into the water and the proud owner shouted to his magnificent dog, “Go get ‘em!” The dog leaped out of the boat, **walked** on the water, picked up a bird and returned to the boat. As soon as he dropped the duck into the boat, the dog trotted across the water again and grabbed another duck and brought it back to the boat. The owner beamed with pride as his wonderful dog **walked** across the water to retrieve each of the birds, one by one. Unable to resist the opportunity to brag a little, he asked his buddies, “Do you notice anything unusual about my dog?” One of them rubbed his chin and said, “Yes. Come to think of it I do! That silly dog doesn’t know how to swim, does he?”

Immediately following the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, about which we heard Fr. Commins share in his sermon last week, Jesus made, that’s right, **made** the disciples get into a boat, and directed them to row over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, a short distance of some six miles. This body of water has a reputation of sudden storms swooping down out of the hills, making it very difficult for anyone caught on the water. Having the blessing of seeing and being on the Sea of Galilee, I have a greater understanding of today’s gospel story. The Sea of Galilee is some 600 feet below the level of the Mediterranean Sea. And down through the centuries, deep ravines have been cut into the hillsides by water run-off. These deeply cut ravines act like huge funnels to draw down the winds from the surrounding mountains. The winds rush through the ravines and onto the sea creating perilous conditions for small, fragile boats.

Assuming that Jesus would meet them on the other side of the sea, the twelve started out. They were not quite halfway across when bad weather hit. Like Steve and I in our canoe, they made one foot forward and three back. About four in the morning, tired and exhausted, the lives of these twelve men were suddenly changed forever.

The event that unfolded in the wee hours of this particular morning shook the disciples’ foundation of faith to their very core of believing. Their experience began in fear, but triumphed in a faith

dependent upon the Lord Jesus Christ; a faith that opened for them the realization that Jesus was, indeed, the Son of God.

Fear tears the guts out of faith; fear is the opposite of faith. The twelve learned that faith is trusting in God.

At the height of this horrible storm, the main subject of this story turns to Peter. For many of us, this story of Peter climbing out of the boat and approaching Jesus seemingly ends in a spiritual disaster. Peter sees Jesus approaching the boat and is the only one of the twelve who recognizes that it is the Lord walking on the water to meet them. We have a tendency to think badly of Peter, for true to his impulsive nature, he asked to do what only God could do. Peter asked Jesus if he, too, could walk on the water to meet him. To which Jesus commanded Peter, "Come."

Well, we know the story all too well. Peter did indeed walk on the water for a bit, but then his trust in the Lord wavered, the darkness and the churning waters distracted his attention away from Jesus and down he began to sink. Crying out for help, Jesus rescues him and the two climb into the boat. Jesus then calms the sea, for which we should not be surprised. After all, He is the creator, ruler of the universe. Calming a mere little storm on the Sea of Galilee is no big deal. The awestruck and dumbfounded disciples' learning curve was significantly increased that stormy morning.

Through the centuries, Peter has been the butt end of jokes and comments about his experience early that day. But I want to leave with you this morning a different message, a message that has much for us to ponder about.

Peter's action's revealed that he apparently was the only one in the boat who **began** to understand what believing in Jesus and following him was all about. Peter was beginning to understand what faithful discipleship required. Peter realized that with God's power in our lives, we can begin to do what God does, and that is to step out in faith, to be the ones who ignore the limitations we put on ourselves.

Think about it! Peter is the only one of the twelve who got out of the boat. Peter is the only human being to have walked on water! No other human being can claim this. At the Episcopal Conference grounds near Ashville, North Carolina, there is a sign on the railing of the balcony overlooking a small lake that reads, "Please do not walk on the water." I appreciate the assumption that one can! Peter did! Peter took the initiative and got out of the boat. The darkness, the churning waters, the presumed safety and comfort of the boat did not matter. Peter left the comfort zone of the boat to reach Jesus. Peter left the safety of the boat to come to his Lord. Peter took a step of faith and got out of the boat! Peter had faith, faith in Jesus. And because he did, he has the blessing of being the only mortal man to ever walk on water!

Why didn't the other eleven join Peter? Could it be that they were afraid, afraid to leave the comfort and safety of the boat. Isn't this the typical human response? We do not want to move from the safety of our present environment. We do not wish to leave our comfort zone to come to Jesus. We are afraid to step out in faith.

We know from the Gospels that the disciples truly did not understand who Jesus was until Pentecost. But Peter began to understand. Peter began to realize that Jesus was indeed the Son of God who could do all things, and that included walking on water. Peter began to grasp what discipleship required.

What does Jesus expect from us? Jesus expects us to respond to His invitation, to follow him, to obey His commission to work for him and to serve him. This means that we will have to get out of the boat and trust in the Lord! Your "boat" may be your home, your car, your job, your money, your relationships, your tradition, your friends, your family, anything that can make you feel comfortable enough to be hesitant to step out of your comfort zone in faith and follow Jesus.

In order for us to receive our blessings of ministry that God has in store for us, we need to step out of our boats, The blessing of God will be received out on the water, not in the boat. **The blessings of God will be found out on the water; not in the boat.**

It is a given, perfect faith we do not have. As we know, Peter vacillated between faith and fear during the days of Jesus' earthly ministry, the most painful being his denial of Jesus on the eve of His crucifixion. It was not until after the resurrection that Peter fully understood. Ultimately, Peter's **faith** in the Lord became the rock upon which Jesus built His Church.

We are truly representative of Peter. We do not have perfect faith. We fall. We sink as did Peter. Peter raised his hands seeking help as he sank into the water. The Lord lifted him out of danger. Many of us here today are parents. As parents, we have fond memories of our toddling children coming towards us as fast as their chubby little legs will carry them, crying "Daddy; Mommy!" Their eyes glued to ours, believing that if they just keep their eyes on us, they will make it. Their arms, their arms are outstretched, running for all their worth. Our little children reach out toward us in anticipation and trust that we will be there to receive them. And what loving parent would refuse to bend down and pick up such a precious package?

Why is it that we, as adults, have not learned this valuable lesson when it comes to having faith in Jesus? When we come to him in faith and trust, with our arms raised and out stretched to him, will He not in only the deepest love that God has for us, pick us up and comfort us? As a little child has faith that the parent will pick him up, so we are to have faith and trust that Jesus will do the same for us.

Jesus commands us yes, commands us, to get out of our boats, to get beyond our comfort zone, to venture forth in ministry despite our fear. And when we begin to sink, raise our hands with humble and thankful hearts, trust Jesus to save us, to feed us, to strengthen us, so that we may return to our labor for the Lord. This is what the Lord expects of us.

This morning's Gospel message is not one to wallow in the failure of human beings, but one that reveals who Jesus truly is, our Creator Lord and Savior, and to put our trust and faith in Him. Once we do

that, then we are commanded, we are required, to take one more additional step: in faith, get out of the boat, get out of our comfort zone and do the work of the Lord.

You and I are living and making religious history. We are living in times of severe Spiritual stress in which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is under harsh and relentless attack. Troubled times call for, as the book of Joshua records, “The strong and the courageous” to, in faith, leave their comfort zone, to get out of the boat to serve the Lord Jesus. For the sake of the gospel, we are being asked to leave our boat, to leave our comfort zone and, with our eyes focused on Christ, to walk on stormy wind whipped waters. It is my hope and prayer that you will not only respond to His command to “Come,” but also that you will ask how you can serve.