

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 10, 2014

"Keep Your Eyes On Jesus."

Matthew 14:22-33

A bored, retired man in California made quite a splash a while back. It seems he decided to tie helium balloons to his lawn chair. He wanted to take a ride. After he tied a few balloons to his chair it started to lift off the ground. So he called his neighbors to hold the chair down. He tied more balloons forty, fifty, sixty of them. While the neighbors were still holding the chair the man strapped himself in. Finally, he told them, "Let go."

He expected to float in the air about 10 feet. He had a sharp pointed stick to pop the balloons so that he would come gently back down. His friends let go of the chair and it began to soar up in the air with the man still strapped to it 30 feet, 40 feet, 50 feet...right on above the house and trees and out of sight.

About that time, at a Los Angeles Airport, the traffic controller received a report: "This is Captain Jones, flight 411. I'd like to report that I've just passed a man in a lawn chair at 3,000 feet."

I'm happy to report that the man eventually came down safely. Reporters asked, "Why did you do such a thing?" He gave a great answer. He said, "Sometimes you have to do something." Whether right or wrong, there are times when we have to do something, or, depending on the situation, at least say something.

Simon Peter was like that. He missed many great opportunities to keep his mouth shut. but there were times when he just had to say something. And sometimes he planted his foot right behind his bicuspid. He also missed several good opportunities to be still. But again, that was not his nature. Sometimes he just had to do something. And so, in the Garden of Gethsemane he cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, and in today's story, he nearly drowns.

You know the story. It takes place immediately after the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus still has not had time to grieve the death of his cousin John the Baptist. He still needed a time to be alone with his Father. And so he instructed his disciples to get back into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side of the lake. After he had finally dismissed the crowd, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone. Meanwhile, the boat with the disciples in it was being tossed around by the wind and the waves.

Shortly before dawn, after having communed with his Father, Jesus went out to where the disciples were in the boat. He got there, says Matthew, by walking on the water. As you can imagine, this terrified the disciples. It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. We can't blame them. Ordinary people don't walk on water. Of course, this minor episode in Jesus' life has been the target of much humor.

For example, there is a story about a Scotsman, who was taking a trip to the Holy Land. When he got to the Sea of Galilee he was aghast when he found out it would cost 50 dollars an hour to rent a boat to go out on the water. "Hoot, man," he said, "In Scotland I could have a boat for about \$20." "That might be true," said the boat man, "but you have to take into account that the Sea of Galilee is water on which our Lord himself walked." "Well, at \$50 an hour," said the Scotsman, "it's little wonder he walked."

There also is a silly story about a man named John in Minnesota who heard a rumor that his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather all had walked on water in their 21st birthdays. So, on his 21st birthday, John and his good friend Steve headed out to the lake. "If they did it, I can too!" he insisted.

When John and Steve arrived at the Lake, they rented a boat and began paddling. when they got to the middle of the lake, John stepped off the side of the boat...and nearly drowned. Furious and somewhat ashamed, he and Steve headed for home. When John arrived at home, he asked

his grandmother for an explanation. "Grandma, why could I not walk on water on my 21th birthday like my father, and his father, and his father before him?" The feeble Minnesota grandmother took John by the hands, looked into his eyes, and explained, "That's because your father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were born in January...you were born in July, dear."

I guess if it had been January and the Sea of Galilee had somehow frozen over, anyone could have walked on it. But this wasn't Minnesota and it wasn't January. Yet Jesus walked on the water and his disciples were afraid. Jesus tried to calm them: "Take courage!" he said. "It is I. Don't be afraid." And of course, it is Simon Peter who speaks up: "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." You've got to appreciate Peter's can-do spirit. "Come," Jesus said.

Then, Matthew tells us, Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. I imagine Peter started thinking to himself, "Wow, this is great. Look at me. I'm doing it. I'm walking on the water."

But Simon Peter saw the wind beginning to pick up and suddenly he was afraid and he began to sink. "Lord, save me!" he cried out. Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. I suspect Jesus had a smile on his face, don't you? "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then, says Matthew, those who were in the boat worshiped Jesus and said, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Well, yes, Jesus is the Son of God. That's why we are here this day. but I also believe we can learn something from Simon Peter's experience. Sometimes you have to do something. The guy in the lawn chair was right. Sometimes you have to do something. I believe that is why we find Simon Peter so attractive. He wasn't the kind of individual to sit around and reflect on a situation. He was the kind of man who acted first and thought about the implications later. That sometimes got him into trouble. But, at least, he lived out his convictions. At least he was in the water where the action was. That's refreshing. Most followers of our Lord tend to be highly cautious persons who never take a step out of the boat. Notice that the other disciples did not join him on his adventure. Even James and John, the Sons of Thunder, were timid souls in comparison to Peter.

Somebody once called the decision to follow Jesus a leap of faith, like jumping off a cliff. Maybe that is why so few of us really want to follow Christ. We're not into cliff jumping. We're not that adventurous. You know it's true. We're good persons. Nice persons. Sweet persons. We wouldn't hurt a fly. We were brought up to respect the rights of others. We try hard to keep the Ten Commandments and a few lesser commandments that aren't even mentioned in the Bible. We've no major vices, but few major virtues either.

God must get awfully frustrated with those of us who are content to sit and wait when there is a world out there that needs saving.

Years ago there was a message in the Wall Street Journal that I think would benefit all of us. It went like this: "The greatest waste of our natural resources is the number of people who never achieve their potential. Get out of the slow lane. Shift into the fast lane. If you think you can't, you won't. If you think you can, there is a good chance you will. Even making the effort will make you feel like a new person. Reputations are made by searching for things that can't be done and doing them. Aim low: boring. Aim high: soaring."

Simon Peter wanted to soar. Maybe not in a lawn chair, but Peter had a sense of adventure. Perhaps this is why Jesus chose him to lead the early church. There are times when you need someone to act, even if, from time to time, they blunder. As it has been said, "When all is said and done, more is said than done." That is particularly true of the church. Sometimes you have to do something.

It's only when Peter takes his eyes off Jesus that he begins to sink rather than soar. That's how being a follower of Jesus works. As long as we are focused on our faith, we're all right. When we focus on our fears, we are in trouble. Peter suddenly became aware of the wind and the waves and the great depth of water beneath his feet. He became nervous when he suddenly realized the

seriousness of his situation and he began to panic, and if Jesus had not been there, he would probably have drowned.

Did you know that sometimes happens in a church? A small group of people have a dream for their church and they begin to believe that this dream is from God. They believe they are following Jesus. And soon they have a plan and that plan begins to materialize. Others are all for it. A winning and wonderful future begins to take shape. but then the inevitable happens. Opposition begins to materialize in the congregation. "It's too expensive," some begin to say. "It's too radical. It'll bankrupt the church. I understand old Mr. So-and-So is against it and if he leaves, he will take his money with him." And on it goes. So, because we prefer peace in the church more than we prize progress, support begins to falter and soon it disappears altogether. Bishop John Spong said it well: "Most churches will die of boredom long before they die of controversy."

How can a dream dissipate that once seemed to be God's will for a church? People take their eyes for a moment off of Jesus. They listen to their fears rather than their faith. They are more conscious of the opposition than the opportunity God has given them to do something wonderful. That is the story of every church that has somehow failed to be what Christ has called it to be. Somewhere along the way there was a turning point when the sound of the wind drowned out the sound of the Savior's voice. Keep your eyes upon Jesus. That is the secret of doing great things for God.

This is also the secret of a fulfilling life. Focus on your faith not on your fears. No matter how fierce the storm, ignore the wind and the waves and listen to the voice of the Master. Keep looking at Jesus. That's the secret of a fulfilling life. That's the secret of a strong church. Jesus loves the Simon Peters of this world; people who are willing to get out of the boat and test the waves. He loves people who keep their eyes on him even when the winds are threatening and the waves are rolling. He loves people who focus on their faith rather than their fears. Sometimes you just have to do something. Yes, you do. But don't forget the simple rule of success in any endeavor keep your eyes on Jesus.