

“Fail Better”

Sermon preached at Church on the Hill
Lenox, Massachusetts

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Text: Matthew 14:22-33

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ²⁸ Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

1

Rachel was a little more than two years old: adventurous, curious, fearless. She was fearless in the way that belongs only to two-year olds and daredevils: with her mom in sight, the world held no dangers. Angela and her sister Maria were getting the two girls ready for bed. It so happened that they both turned their backs on Rachel for all of about five seconds, which was all the time she needed. Rachel chose that moment to try something she had not tried before: flying. She clambered up to the top bunk and launched herself into the air. Maria happened to turn around to find her small niece flying past — and losing altitude quickly. She instinctively raised her arms and Rachel dropped into them.

It’s not that Rachel knew from takeoff that her flight would end well. Nor did she know for a certainty that the rules of gravity did not apply to her. For Rachel, in that moment, there was only a deep curiosity, and the complete confidence that Mom and Aunt Maria held all dangers at bay. In such an ideal world — who wouldn’t jump?

2

With Jesus, certain rules no longer apply. Even the laws of physics get suspended: he walks on water.

The story is absurd. You’ve heard the jokes: next-day headlines pronounce that “Jesus cannot swim.” The cynics knowingly smirk and say, “He knew where the rocks were.” But the jokes belong to those who do not or will not or cannot believe that God is actually showing up. The cynicism belongs to those — maybe some of us, on some days — who can’t bring ourselves to imagine in a human savior who is also entirely divine: a body that eats and drinks and sweats

and sleeps — and also acts with all the powers of heaven, right on earth. Or, in this case, on the sea of Galilee.

Stories like this one sometimes chase people away from the faith. “You ask me to trust too much,” says one. “I’m not gullible!” says another. “And why would I get out of the boat?” say others of us. When the boat is what I know best; when the boat is the only apparent safety in a dangerous storm; when the boat is for sure, and the savior seems to be a terrifying apparition: why would I get out of the boat?

Consider what brought us to this point. Just a little while ago, Jesus learned of the death of John the Baptist: his cousin and the man whom he greatly admired. We can tell that much because the first sermon that Jesus gave was just what John was preaching, and imitation really is a sincere form of flattery. (In a minute, I’m going to imitate the preacher John Ortberg, just so you know¹).

So Jesus learned of John’s death, and headed for the hills to pray. Silence; time alone. But the disciples, and the crowds, found him out. There were Jesus and his friends, surrounded by a hungry crowd of thousands. The disciples tried to send them away. But we heard last week what came next. Jesus feeds them all, with nothing more than five loaves and two fish, and the grace of God.

The grace of God: the part of the equation that the disciples didn’t understand; the ingredient they had failed to find. And immediately Jesus told them to get in the boat and head to the other side of the lake, where his mission would continue.

Jesus walked out of the storm, across the water, into the wind.

The disciples, fighting a big storm in a small boat, see him — an apparition. Apparently they can handle the storm, but not the ghost-like savior, and they are terrified.

But Peter, so often the first to step forward, asks Jesus to command him. Jesus says, “Come.” Peter walks on water. Until he becomes aware again of the tempest, and fails.

At this moment, the story appears to be about failure: something to be avoided. [Invitation to a mass confession of failure:] Who here has failed a test? Who here has failed to stay perfectly patient with their three-year old child? Who here has failed to be your best self in a relationship? Who here has failed to trust God?

Failure is a kind of death. We face it every day; we don’t like it; we prefer to stay safe and alive.

If you get out of the boat, you may sink. But if you stay safe and secure in the boat it is absolutely certain that you will never walk on the water. And we were made to walk on water.

God fashioned and made us to get out of the boat. Sometimes, you will achieve what had seemed impossible, like Peter. Sometimes you will sink. When you fail, Jesus will pick you up. In Samuel Beckett’s words: “No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

As long as we stay in relative safety, the relative safety of the boat, we miss the chance to experience trusting Jesus. We miss a deep relationship with Jesus, because every good relationship begins when we risk failure and dare to trust.

¹ This sermon follows the line of thought of the Rev. Ortberg, from a video recording played at the Massachusetts Conference (UCC) Annual Meeting, June 2002, at Mt. Holyoke College.

We stay into the boat, gripping its gunwales, because it is the only protection from the storm we can perceive. Until we practice trusting Jesus, and step onto the sea.

We stay in our houses, relying on their familiarity and reliability — until we practice trusting Jesus, and place ourselves in the rooms where the homeless and hungry are.

We stay in our political persuasions, hoping against hope that someone with common sense will rise to a position of influence — until we practice trusting Jesus, and cry out like trumpets, ceaselessly, until the powerful seek the well being of the powerless.

We stay in our conviction that we can't do much because we are too few, or too tired, or too old, or just don't know how — until we practice trusting Jesus, giving away forgiveness and food and healing touch and watching the world change.

I don't know just what boat you are in. But I know this gospel says that any boat — from a canoe to a battleship — any boat is too small for the storms of life. We belong out of the boat, alongside the one who rules the wind and the waves.

3

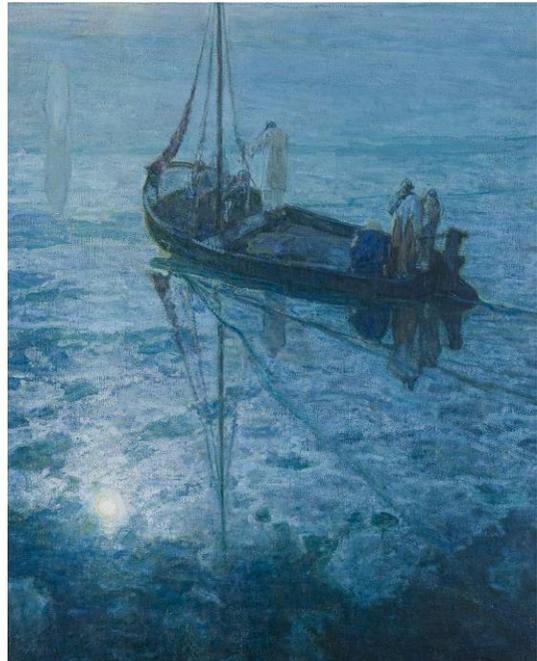
Rachel, having conquered land by walking and air by successfully flying, next sought to demonstrate her mastery over yet another element. So one fine summer day when Angela had the girls at the lake, Rachel walked into the water. She walked until the water was up to her knees, and she kept on walking, heading straight out from shore. The lake rose higher on her little body with every step until it covered her belly, chest, shoulders, mouth, nose, eyes. As the top of her head disappeared under the water, Angela grabbed hold and pulled her out. This was such a tremendous accomplishment that Rachel continued to demonstrate her skill over and over, walking in over her head, fearless.

Jesus seems to be saying, “Don't be afraid. Let go of your anxieties. Believe in me.”

What could it mean, to place more trust in Jesus than in the things that usually win our trust? To place more trust in a ghostly figure walking across water? — as in that beautiful, unearthly painting by Henry Ossawa Turner that is on today's bulletin cover.

When Jesus says, “give food to the hungry ... visit the imprisoned,” can we learn to trust that word as more authoritative for us than the plans we have made? There's a leap of faith: to trust that what we most need is what we can give to someone else.

Or when Jesus says, “turn the other cheek,” perhaps the leap of faith asks us: can we learn that as individuals and even as a country we are always the ones who have the first chance to break the cycle of violence? The rhetoric from Washington is filled with violent bluster; the



rally in Charlottesville glorified xenophobia, racism, and white supremacy — it's easy to see how horrifyingly wrong those are. But think closer to home: at any moment of tension, you are the first one who can de-escalate. You are the one who can re-make the world by initiating forgiveness. Can you and I take the leap of faith that says: "Actions that smack of revenge or actions that aim for advantage are not worth of my baptism?" It might be even harder than walking on water.

What would life look like, if we risked trusting Jesus more than the storms that rage about us? What would life look like, if we behaved toward every person the way we long for them to behave toward us: with interest, patience, concern, and delight, holding each accountable to the fullness of their potential?

4

Such leaps of faith might be harder than walking on water. But we know something that even the disciples didn't know. We have been given the gift of grace that reaches us on the far side of the cross, on the far side of the empty tomb, the grace of God that says: give up your weakness to me, and I shall give you my strength.

As long as we try to fill our hungers and calm our fears by ourselves, we are lost. As long as we try to pilot the ship of our life, we are vulnerable to the storm. But once we admit we can't do it alone, the one who fills every hunger and calms every tempest is here, waiting for us.

The truly hard work — the miracle of our faith — has already been done. God is with us. God has done the miraculous work of choosing human form and surviving suffering and defeating death. Now Christ calls you and me to place our trust in the one who separates the waters to call forth creation, who leads the people through the sea from slavery into freedom, who walks over water to all of us who are tempest-tossed and frightened of the storm.

No one who believes in him will be put to shame, says St. Paul: no one who believes will be lost. We believers might be scorned as gullible. That's alright. Just tell the nay-sayers: you know where the verb "believe" comes from? From the same root of the verb, "love." We give our weak and longing hearts to God, placing our trust in the one place worthy of trust, and we are made whole.

5

We can fly from the top bunk, like young Rachel. And God is here to catch us.

We can walk across the water, like St. Peter. And if we, like him, submerge instead of stay on top — today is a perfect day to try again. Even to fail again. By God's grace, to fail better.

Listen to that Gospel promise: in answer to our hunger, plenty. In answer to our storms: a cessation of the winds. In answer to our fear, the voice of Jesus: "Come."

You belong out of the boat. Go ahead: take the next step. God is waiting.