

Proper 12
2 Samuel 11:1-15
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

In The Boat with Jesus

Jesus said, "It is I; do not be afraid."

Today's Gospel reading from John has some particularly vivid images. Perhaps because it comes first and is a more predominant part of the reading, people often focus on the feeding of the 5000, but the story of Jesus walking on water conjures up such a strange picture. The disciples go on ahead of him to Capernaum in a boat when a storm hits. Suddenly they see a man walking on the water towards them and this understandably terrifies them even more than the storm itself. But when they see it is Jesus and he is able to reassure them, they place him in the boat, and almost immediately they arrive at their destination.

I have often wondered what it would look like to see someone walking on water. I've seen movies of Jesus walking on water and it always looks pretty dumb. My father used claim he could walk on water but whenever he tried, all he did was get wet.

So I never have been able to come up with a satisfactory picture in my mind of what it would look like. But the image from the story that does

remain is how Jesus, even in the midst of a terrible storm is able to calm his disciples and bring them to safety. All they have to do, all we have to do, is pay attention, bring him near, and obey on him.

It is a really simple lesson. Most of us who are followers of Jesus know this is what we are supposed to do. And yet, often it is quite a bit harder than it seems it should be. Our reasons for this are varied and in some ways as individual as we are, but even so, they share some common characteristics. And primary among them may be when we are troubled, upset, anxious or scared, the main focus of our attention is usually ourselves.

We wonder, how will I get through this? What do I have to do? How can I avoid this? How can I fix or at least, change this? What can I do to make it go away? In other words, what is it we can do that will help make us feel better or at least like we have more control in the quickest amount of time?

We may pray during these times, and in fact probably do, but our prayers are often aimed at getting us to the place we want to be and not necessarily the place we should be or realistically will end up at. Somehow

leaving it in God's hands or truly and sincerely asking for God's will isn't our first option.

Now, I do not trying to be overly critical here. These are normal responses, especially when we are caught up short. But the truth is, when we can get over ourselves, the reality of what God offers us through the life and redemptive power of Jesus can take us to places we might not even know exist within us.

Like most of you, I can remember times in my life when I didn't allow God sufficient access to my heart, my life, or my nerves, even though it would have been really helpful to do so. But there have also been some times when maybe by chance or grace, I happened to look through the waves and see Jesus coming towards me, and it made all the difference in the world.

One time in particular immediately came back to me when I first read over this Gospel in preparing for today's sermon.

On a dark December night in 1996, I received a phone call from my parents who were living up in Torrance at the time. Dad, the would-be water walker, had just been diagnosed with lung cancer and his doctor estimated he had maybe two years to live.

The diagnosis in and of itself was not a surprise. While he had quit smoking several years before and seemed to be in pretty good health, it hadn't been enough to undo the damage caused by smoking 3 to 4 packs of cigarettes a day for over 50 years.

After I got off the phone, I could feel myself starting to go on overwhelm, the implications of what I just heard starting to cascade all around me. But then in the midst of it, I looked up and asked God, "now what?" It wasn't a very elegant prayer, but almost immediately my mind began to calm down, and I could see the necessary steps I would have to take laid out before me. The open nature of the prayer in this case seemed to help.

The time from then to my father's surgery, a month later, was pretty surreal, but somehow everything just fell in place. It's not like I was in some sort of Zen state the whole time, trust me, I wasn't.

There were times when I was scared, sad, angry, and certainly worried. But for some reason I was usually able to find a calm center from which I could move forward. Ultimately of course, the good news of that time was I able to spend not 2 but 12 more years with my father before he

passed away. But I also learned some things about God in the process as well.

In the years since, I have thought quite a bit about what happened and how we are able at sometimes to find a calm center in the midst of difficulties and at others, it seems to elude us.

What is it that distinguishes those times when we are able to bring Jesus into the boat with us, from those when we just sort of leave him out in the water. And I've come to think the difference may lie, at least in part, on the degree to which we are willing to surrender our lives to God.

The whole concept of surrender really isn't very popular or easy in our western culture, especially for those of us with even a scintilla of a type A personality. We like to feel as if we are in control, even if the boat is going down. The dictionary defines "surrender," in part as "to give oneself up, as into the power of another; submit or yield,"¹ and the thought of doing such a thing is often completely counter-intuitive.

Let's face it, epic stories are seldom told about willing surrender but rather about fighting on against great odds. And obviously both can be part of a life of faith. But when we do either consciously seeking God's will, we don't fight on or struggle against things for our own sake, but for the sake

of the one who came to live among us so we may know another way. A life of faith is not about giving up, it is about giving in to the fullness of how and why we were created—to love God, to be loved by God, and out of that, love each other and all God has created.

What we surrender is the impulse or desire to go it alone.

Which brings us back to the first part of the Gospel story. Jesus' disciples didn't see how they could feed all those people with only 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. And by themselves they couldn't have. But they weren't by themselves. And neither are we.

Jesus is always moving towards us, beckoning us to pay attention, to bring him near, and obey him. And to the extent we do just that, he is more able to not only reassure us of his presence, but lead us to the place where we may come to know God's love and care in ways we cannot even begin to imagine.

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ⁱ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/surrender> (accessed 25 July 2009).