

10th Sunday after Pentecost, yr. a, 8/9/2020
Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-34
Take Heart ... Rev. Dr. Deborah M. Jenks

If I say “war”, you might say ... “peace”. If I say “love”, you might say ...
“hate” ... “black” ... “white” ... “rich” ... “poor” ... “Democrat” ... “Republican” ...
We have this almost reflexive way of responding with opposites or dualities.
“Faith” ... ? ... “Doubt?”

Is “doubt” really the opposite of “faith”? I remember once someone saying
that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. The opposite of faith is
certainty. I suppose we can safely say that the opposite of certainty is doubt ...
but then if we say that certainty is the opposite of faith, does that mean faith and
doubt are similar?

In the eyes of many, those who identify themselves as Christians are who
profess faith in God and who look to Jesus as God’s Son for our salvation.
Christians are those who believe as Paul teaches in our reading from his Letter
to the Romans that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”.
For myself, there are times when I’ve held onto faith almost as a certain
guarantee that that all things shall be well, and that God loves us, that there is
right and wrong, good and bad, and that by my certainty of faith God will be on
my side, will be with us in every opposition we experience in our lives, in our
relationships, in our world.

We all want to believe that we are good, that we are faithful. We like to believe that in our best moments we want what God wants for us, for those we love, and for others. However ... can we ever be that certain?

We all know in our hearts, somewhere deep inside us if not out there for all the world to see, that we are not always so good. And so we perhaps wonder, we come to doubt that our faith is enough to guarantee anything when we come face to face with God. And if we don't dare to wonder or doubt, than we cling to our faith with a kind of dogged, determined certainty. Or else, assuming we are of a more liberal, less black and white bent in our faith and approach to living, it might comfort us to think that, since there can be no way to be absolutely certain of our goodness, God still loves us anyway and that certainty will be enough.

After feeding the multitudes – 5,000 in all – with five loaves and two fish, Jesus dismisses the crowd and sends the disciples off in the boat across the water while he goes off to be alone and pray. By evening the boat with the disciples was being battered by wind and water, the wind being against them. Early in the morning the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water toward them. They were terrified, and cried out in fear, "It is a ghost!" But immediately Jesus spoke to them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water toward Jesus, but the he noticed to strong wind and became frightened. He began to sink, and cried out, "Lord,

save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught Peter, saying, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” When they got into the boat the wind ceased. (Matt. 14:22-34)

It seems as if Peter started sinking because he was afraid and began to doubt, and so Jesus chided him about his “little faith”. Since I was a child and first heard this gospel story, I understood faith in this case as enabling Peter to walk on water, and doubt as causing him to sink “like a stone”. as it says in Mark’s version of the gospel – (which as I got older always gave me a chuckle at the pun on the name “Peter” meaning “rock” on which Jesus would build his church, and here that the “rock” is sinking.) I think that this is how we have come to commonly understand faith and how it works in our lives.

But as I pondered the gospel passage a footnote in my Bible caught my eye. Where Peter says to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”, the footnote says “Peter’s request recalls Satan’s temptation of Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. When after 40 days in the wilderness Satan came to Jesus and said, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.” So Peter’s walking on water may not have been a matter of faith, but of temptation – of putting God to the test!?”

Jesus did not call Peter to get out of the boat and walk on the water. It was Peter’s own idea. We have to ask ... why did he want to walk on the water?

Because Jesus did? It seems as if Peter wanted proof of some kind that it was Jesus – that he was reaching for some kind of certainty. But maybe he also wanted to share in the glory of it. I mean it really is a meaningless, useless sort of thing to want ... to walk on the water like Jesus. It could be kind of presumptuous, and it also could be a way of proving to himself and the others “Look at me, see how great a disciple I am.”

“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Jesus’ chiding of Peter could have little to do with Peter sinking, and more to do with him wanting to get out of the boat and walk on the water in the first place.

How often is our “test of faith” in ourselves or in others something like Peter’s? If we had enough faith we could walk on water. If we had enough faith we could overcome all our problems. If we had enough faith we could be healed. If we have faith, miracles will happen. Yes miracles do happen, but what happens when in the course of our lives we are hit with the realities of disease and pandemic, accidents and wars, and relationships and trust and promises broken, and a sense. What happens when all our best and faithful efforts seem to make little difference? What happens when, as it did with Peter, the Lord of Life is put to death and we start sinking like stones? If faith is certainty, then what happens?

Much turmoil and pain and suffering in our lives and in this world are caused by our trying to sustain our certainty and calling it faith. Like Peter and the other disciples in the gospels, we end up living in a constant state of checking ourselves and testing God to see if we have enough faith – sort of like planting a seed and then constantly digging it up to see if its sprouting. Maybe faith is more a matter of trust than certainty.

(Peter) cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out and caught him, saying, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him. (Mt. 14:30-33)

Maybe faith is not a matter of walking on water, but staying with the boat. Daring to trust that God in Christ comes to us, is present with us, healing, saving, reconciling, forgiving, loving, and accompanying us as we share God’s salvation, God’s love and reconciliation with others.

Faith is trusting – that God in Christ is present and working in us and through us, and sustaining us through this community of faithful people. I am reminded of something Mother Teresa of Calcutta wrote:

“Don’t think that love, to be true, has to be extraordinary. What is necessary is to continue to love. How does a lamp burn if it is not by the continuous feeding of little drops of oil? When there is no oil, there is no light. ... Dear Friends, what are our drops of oil in our lamps? They are the small things

from every day life, the joy, the generosity, the little good things, the humility, and the patience, a simple thought for someone else. Our way to be silent, to listen, to forgive, to speak, and to act, they are the real drops of oil that make our lamps burn vividly our whole life. Don't look for Jesus far away. He is not there. He is in you, take care of your lamp and you will see him." (Quoted in *Spiritual Caregiving: Healthcare as a Ministry* p. 56)

When they had crossed over the sea ... people from that place recognized him, they ... brought all who were sick ... and begged that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched him were healed. Amen.