

## “Do Not Be Afraid”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, August 13, 2017

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Romans 10:5-15 and Matthew 14:22-33

*Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that ‘the person who does these things will live by them.’ But the righteousness that comes from faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say?*

*‘The word is near you,  
on your lips and in your heart’*

*(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’*

*But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’*

Romans 10:5-15

*Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’*

*Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’ When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’*

Matthew 14:22-33

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within, the words that we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from your sacred scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word do its work within us, among us, and through us this day, and in the days to come so that we might be your people, faithful and trusting. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

Karen and I were talking earlier this morning, and she was sharing with me a comment that a colleague made on Facebook that said, "If anyone stood in the pulpit today and did not preach about Charlottesville, Virginia, they were not preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ." Spoiler alert: You might not hear the gospel of Jesus Christ if that is true. I don't know about you, but I find myself this morning identifying with the disciples in the boat. It seems to me that the winds are blowing, the boat's being battered. I'm wondering if it's going to sink or hold out. I see a lot of people walking around saying things who want to proclaim that they are, in fact, the Savior, the knowledgeable one, the one who can provide wholeness if only the world would stop and listen to them. And to be honest, I'm not sure which one to pay attention to. I find that the strong winds of worrying about nuclear missiles being launched from North Korea or, God forbid, somewhere that the United States controls, where the images of people fighting in the streets of Charlottesville, each side with helmets and shields and sticks, and the righteous indignation that only stupidity can bring at their side. And I wonder, "What on Earth is going on in our world?"

The boat is, in fact, being battered about. And there are many who are crying out, "Lord, save us." And I do not pretend that in a week or within 24 hours I have any answers to share with you. I found myself this week thinking about what Jesus did immediately after doing such a great thing as feeding the 5,000. He put the disciples into the boat. He set them off on their journey. He dismissed the crowds. And then, he went to the mountain and prayed by himself. My fear is in this day of immediate reaction or response by Twitter or Facebook, that those who are praying and seeking God's wisdom have yet to be heard from in these days. The condemnation comes quick now in our world. If you don't say the right thing within 10 minutes, you're in trouble. How can we understand what the right thing is in the middle of a situation if it hasn't even ended.

I find myself wanting to be like Christ and to get still and quiet and to pray and to listen, and yet I find myself, again and again, identifying with the disciples, those sitting on a boat being tossed to and fro wondering what on Earth is happening to us. And then Jesus does what he has so many other times, he comes to them, and he says, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." I believe that it's important to remind ourselves that the disciples did not get in the boat and set off to find Christ. They were not seekers after a God who is distant. They were on the journey to another station of ministry being tossed about and God came after them and said, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid."

When the Virgin Mary was wondering what might be going on with her, the angel Gabriel said, "Peace, you have found favor with God, do not be afraid." When the disciples were huddled together in a locked room on Easter evening wondering what happened to their beloved teacher upon the cross, the tomb being empty now, Jesus shows up and says, "Peace be with you, do not be afraid." If you hear nothing from the voice of Christ in our time and in our age, hear this. Take heart, I am with you, do not be afraid. Paul says that the feet of those who bring good news are beautiful. I personally don't want you looking at my feet, ever, but I hope always to be bringing you good news. And a while ago we kind of started joking upstairs, that the world is so full of *bad news* that we have

such great job security in the pulpit because we bring *good news*. It's almost like the world has forgotten what good news looks like, or tastes like, or smells like.

And today we get the ultimate reminder of what it looks like. Oh, right on cue she cries [laughter]. The ultimate reminder. The child of a family of this church coming forward and being baptized as an infant. A child unable to say anything about her desire to be baptized or to be loved by God or to ask for the forgiveness of her sins that she may have committed [laughter] or may commit in the future, she says nothing. But her parents on her behalf and we as the church on her behalf say to her, "You are loved no matter what. You are forgiven. You are set free. You are mine. Take heart, we are with you. Do not be afraid." And the privilege of being a Christian is that not only do we say that to Lolo today, but we will say it to her as long as she is in our midst and we are together. Do not be afraid.

When Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I", he names and proclaims the same voice that spoke to Moses through the bush. Take heart, I am. Take heart Yaweh. God is, so do not be afraid. It is fear that stops us from being who God desires us to be. It is fear that makes us stop in our tracks and not do those visions or ideas that God lays upon our heart. And we must never forget that it is God and Jesus Christ that say again and again and again through the prophets, through the angels, and maybe even through a preacher now and then, "Do not be afraid."

I ran across a story of what it means to not be afraid. There was a young assistant district attorney who had just started practice in the office and one evening during his first week his boss called him in. She wanted to talk to him about a nickname he had already gotten from the guards over at the courthouse. She called him in and said, "Listen, I just wanted to ask, I hear that the guards call you The Mechanic. What's that about?" and he chuckled and said, "Well, every time I go in they find the little wrench that's in my briefcase." And she said, "Why do you carry a little wrench?" and he shared that after high school and college he wasn't sure what he wanted to do so he went and worked for his uncle in his garage. And every time this particular blue Cadillac would come in for service, as he was working on it he'd get this sense that he was supposed to stand in front of a judge and argue a case. It happened while he was doing the breaks and then months later it happened again while he was changing the oil. And after the second time, he went to his uncle who owned the place and he said, "You know, every time that blue Cadillac comes in I have this sense that I'm supposed to stand before a judge and argue a case." And the uncle said, "You know what, maybe you should."

And the man laid out that he couldn't do it because he couldn't afford it and this and that and all the reasons. And the uncle said to him, "Do not be afraid." And so he applied to law school and was accepted in the evening program, got his degree, worked for a while, and then applied to become an assistant district attorney and was accepted. The wrench he said was a graduation gift for Law School from his uncle. Not only did he say, "Do not be afraid" in that crucial moment, he also reminded him never forget the hard work and good blessings that you have received. In today's world where we are scared, where we are afraid, and where we are unsure of what to say, there is always a place to speak goodness. There is always a place to affirm courage. "Do not be afraid", says Jesus Christ, "for I am with you always." Today we will see that enacted within our community and I pray that we will carry that message with us in the weeks ahead. Amen.