



“Who Does That?”

Pastor Jan Shannon

August 13, 2017

Scripture (NRSV):

Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus Walks on the Water

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, ^[a] 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, ^[b] 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.”

Sermon:

So we're talking about our superhero Jesus, this morning. I selected two different graphic images of the story of Jesus walking on water for us to ponder. It was really helpful to me to look through the eyes of the artist rather than just reading the words. If you look at these two images, I selected them because they have slightly different perspectives. The perspective I want to focus on is depicted in the difference between these two paintings. So you can see in the one, Peter at Jesus' feet, Jesus reaching out for Peter, grasping him by the arm. He's gonna help him stand back up again. And you can see just beyond Peter, you can see the boat, you can see the men in the boat, you can see that there are waves, the boat is being tossed in the waves and the wind.

Then, in the image on your right, you also see Peter reaching up for help and you see Jesus reaching down with a strong arm to pull him up. But where's the boat? Is the boat close by? The boat's much further in the distance. You can barely see the people on the boat. So what I want to talk to you today about is, leaving the boat.

In another picture I wanted to use today, a modern painting I really liked, Peter is standing like very close to the boat, inches away, and he's leaning out and he's reaching for Jesus on one hand, but his other hand, is just inches from the boat. He has just stepped out of the boat and he is still reaching back for it. Whenever I read this story before, I always pictured Peter right next to the boat. I don't know if it's because of paintings I saw as a kid, but for whatever reason, in my mind, when I read this story, it sounded to me like the scripture said, Peter just stepped out of the boat, looked down and went uh-oh and started to sink. I don't know why I always pictured it that way, but that's not actually what the scripture said. It's as if Peter got out of the boat, and was looking at Jesus and was walking towards Jesus and at the moment he actually noticed he was actually walking on water, he began to sink. We don't know when that moment happened. We don't know if it happened immediately when he got out of the boat, like did he take one step and think, "What?!" Maybe he'd been walking for a while and intent on Jesus, following him, reaching for him, and he looked back and saw there was quite a bit of space between himself and his friends. Maybe he looked back between himself and the boat, like the second picture depicts and thought, what am I doing out here?

I am preaching without notes this morning. I have notes on the lectern but I am desperately resisting the urge to look at them . This may seem like a silly thing. Trust me, my stomach hurts. I have been to the bathroom several times this morning. My mouth is dry. I am

nervous as heck. I have left my boat. The boat to me in this story represents all things safe. It represents everything we know, that we count on, that we look to for strength and comfort.

What's in the boat are 11 other guys. Peter's brothers in Christ. Peter alone said "Savior, call to me and I'll come to you." Only Peter asked to be called. Others are sitting in the boat. Probably thinking, "What a fool Peter is." It would have been very easy to go with the crowd and stay in the boat, but Peter said I want to go where you are, Jesus. I want to go out there and do the crazy, wild superhero-thing that you're doing.

And as I studied the scripture this morning, I found that the crazy wild superhero-thing Jesus was doing was not necessarily walking on the water.

What Jesus was doing was dominating water. Jesus was exercising power over the material creation that we call water. Karl Barth, the theologian, has likened water to all things evil that oppress the salvation of God. You can look back to the Old Testament and the story of Jonah and the Whale, of the Flood. In these stories, Bart says, these all represent the oppressive evil that attempts to overthrow the salvation of God. So when Jesus comes walking to them on the water, knowing again, these are Jewish men raised in this theology. To them what he's doing, this isn't just defying gravity, it's not just a physics lesson he's giving them. Jesus is saying I can dominate that which is evil and that which attempts to kill you.

Another thing Jesus is doing out there on the water, when he says to Peter and the other brothers, "Do not worry, it is I." In the Greek the translation of ego eimi, it means "I am." The "I am" statement of the Old Testament, the name that God gave Moses to tell the children of Israel, "I am has sent me." Jesus is declaring his divinity publicly. "I am here. I am able to save you. Not just from the water, the physical water, but from metaphorical water from the evils that oppress you, I am here to save you."

I prepared this sermon before the events of Charlottesville. Once again the Holy Spirit has showed up to give us a message that we need to hear in this place and time today after the events of Charlottesville.

We have got to leave the boat.

Our savior is out there calling us to resist the forces of evil that oppress certain people in America. And we've got to get out of the boat and we've got to meet Jesus out there on the waves.

I'm telling you there is way more metaphor than I can cover here in one short sermon.

One thing I can tell you, if you choose to do that, if you choose to call to Jesus, if you say, "Call to me and I will come to you Lord," if that's you, if you choose to do that, you will leave friends behind in the boat. Your friends in the boat will say, I don't know what in the world has gotten into you, but you are on your own. I can guarantee that will happen.

If you choose to get out of the boat, there will be waves.

In this story, Jesus doesn't calm the sea, and then say, Peter come to me.

He says, "Peter, come to me" while there are waves. I don't know if any of you have spent a lot of time on the water, I've spent a lot of time on the water in my life. The story tells us, the bible tells us the wind was against them. They are trying to sail into the wind. The waves are coming at them. These are real waves. It is treacherous waters. If you choose to get out of the boat and answer Jesus' call, there will be waves. You will get wet. And it will be treacherous. You might come to harm. Hopefully not physical harm. Certainly emotional harm. Because people will attack you. A Pastor in Northern Idaho wrote an article that was in the Spokesman Review yesterday, some of you may have seen it. It attacked and vilified transgender people. I will have none of that. So I wrote a response to the online article and called him out on his hate speech. Since I wrote that, several people on the online comments section have taken me to task.

Some of them have said things like I'm not a Christian, or that I don't preach the gospel of Jesus Christ as a pastor.

A co-worker in social justice work here in Spokane, messaged me this morning privately and said I shouldn't have called it hate speech.

She said, "You use the word hate too easily." I said, "I'm telling you, if you're transgender, it's hate speech."

Hate speech from a man who supports things like those bad bathroom bills that attempt to vilify, and demean, and ostracize human beings. So I told my friend, "I appreciate your words, feel free to call me out anytime that you want, I love that you did it privately, thank you very much. But in my mind, for the friends that I know, who are just trying to live their lives, it's hate speech." So in one comment, just one simple piece of writing, I got attacked. That's what happens when you get out of the boat.

I'd like you to raise your hand if you identify as white. Look around. We're 95% white in this church. We're the ones who need to fix this thing because we're the ones that created this thing.

Four hundred years ago, the very first black people were brought here as slaves. The first black feet that touched American soil, were bought and paid for.

My mother was a proud member of the Daughters of The American Revolution. We did that, my family did that. We have to change that.

We talk about the White Supremacy that was evident yesterday in Charlottesville. White supremacy is real. It's not just a few angry white guys, it's the systemic racism embedded in our country. There are more whites in power. There are more whites than people of color in seats of authority and power, even in regional areas where whites are the minority. That is just flat wrong! We cannot continue to speak over our black and brown siblings in Christ.

We created the systems that oppress them. We have to own that and we have to speak. We have to get out of the boat of comfort and peace and security among ourselves.

We have to get out there and do something and say something. It's not enough to call people we disagree with idiots, that's not helping any. We shouldn't stoop to their level. We have to respond positively with love, like Jesus did. We have to find a way to love them. It's not easy, trust me. But we have to take steps.

The first step is the one Peter took. Peter said, "Savior call to me and I will come to you." Are we willing to step out in faith? Are we willing to be people of faith, not knowing scientifically if God exists? Not sure empirically if Jesus is really the son of God, or if he's just a really good guy. Are we willing to step out in faith? To believe that Jesus has the power to walk on water? To say we, too, want the power to oppress evil?

That's what we have to be willing to do if we want to make any real change in America. I'm not wearing my black stole coincidentally. This a day to remember that Black Lives Matter. One of the posts that I saw on Twitter said that if I really want to do something to create change, I should make a covenant for the next week or the next 30 days, that I should not retweet or repost anything by a white person but only by people of color, to lift up and magnify their voices. They know what they need. We don't need to speak for them. But we can magnify their voice so that it can be heard above the "white noise" of racism.

There're other things you can do.

We can call out racism when we see it.

We can call out privilege when we see it.

I am a white woman, I have privilege of stature, a platform, a pulpit to speak from. This gives me a power other people don't have. I can use this.

What privilege do you have? Think about it; what privilege do you have, that people of color do not have?

If you walk into a grocery store, and pick up an item and put it down, just wander around, you're not going to get followed. If you forget something like I once did, tuck it under your arm and walk out of the store with it, no security manager is going to come and accuse you of stealing. If I write a check, they're not going to ask for two forms of ID. These are things our friends of color, people of color, go through every single day. If you see it, in line, call out the cashier, call out the manager.

We have to speak up; we have to say 'that's not okay'.

Each one of us has to speak up. As a white person living in America, we have so much power and privilege.

This church has been on the forefront of LGBTQ support and advocacy in this city and in this state. Fought hard for R74 for marriage equality to get passed. We can do the same for racial justice. We can stand up as a congregation and say, "not in our town." If one of these groups decides to have a supremacy rally in Spokane. We can't just say 'oh this is so sad', those stupid men and their guns'. You're going to have to show up. You're going to have to get out of the boat and say not in my town. Trust me, you'll get attacked. Your friends back in the boat are going to say, "I don't know who you are."

Maybe that's not all they'll do. You might have family members that say you're not welcome at Thanksgiving dinner. Will that stop you from speaking up?

We can't stand idly by after what happened in Charlottesville, what's been happening in our country for too long. Racism should have no place in our country, and should not be supported by our government.

The Original title for this sermon was "Who Does That." Who walks on water? Jesus Does. Who got out of that boat? One guy out of 12.

If you do choose to get out of the boat, if you do choose to take some active action, some anti-racist action, you're going to lose some friends, but you'll also see that God is there for us every moment, waiting for us to reach out when we are drowning. And we have each other to turn to for strength. As Westminster, we covenant together to oppose racism. And we are ready to leave the boat.