

**Summer By The Lake: Jump!**  
**Matthew 14: 22-33**  
**July 10-11, 2010**  
**Trinity United Methodist Church**  
**Rev. Lore Blinn Gibson**

I was watching iCarly one night with my kids. Every once in a while, something would seem familiar, but I knew I had not watched that show before. Then it hit me – it was the plot. It was lifted from I Love Lucy! Been there, done that, déjà vu all over again.

This passage was chosen because it happens on a lake, and when you are at the lake for any length of time in the summer, you are going to have some rainy days. Let's get ours out of the way here in the beginning.

As I read this passage, I kept being drawn back to verse 22: *Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.*

Why did he have to make them get into the boat? Maybe it's because he just fed 5000 families on a few loaves and a couple of fish. The high of being part of that (after all, they served and collected the 12 baskets of leftovers) is not something you'd want to leave. I can imagine them thinking, "Let's go off alone and have Jesus to ourselves and talk about what we think just happened."

Or maybe they are just tired. It's late afternoon. They've been serving all day.

But I think it's déjà vu all over again.

Back in Chapter 8, Matthew tells about the disciples being out on the lake in a boat, and a storm comes up suddenly as they often do on the Sea of Galilee (which is really a big lake). That time, Jesus was in the boat, but he was asleep. The disciples labor on for a long time and finally, terrified they will die, wake Jesus up. Then he calms the storm and they are saved. They don't understand how he did it, and they sure don't understand who he is!

Same story, different day. As wonderful as it is to be rescued, that does not mean any of the followers of Jesus want a repeat of the storm. Still, Jesus makes them get into the boat.

This time, he does not go along. He goes off to pray. It's the same story, different day. They struggle against the wind and waves, just like last time. The word translated 'buffeted' is literally 'tortured.' They are tortured by the waves. The familiar scenario begins to play itself out, and for hours, they try to get where he told them to go. And they can't. No matter how much they try, they can't do what he has asked of them.

Didn't he know? I mean seriously, if he is God like everyone said, did he know there was a storm coming? Did he know what he was sending them into? Certainly he knew the risk – he does have a decent memory of the previous experience and he could see their reluctance to repeat it. Yet he made them do it anyway.

Up all night, exhausted with the effort, afraid because they are fishermen and they know how this might end, they see someone, something, coming toward them. In the 4<sup>th</sup> watch, between 3 and 6 a.m. Could be that he's coming to them *over the sea* or *towards the sea* (honestly, the translation can go either way).

Finally, after the struggle. Finally, after long hours of fearing they won't make it, Jesus shows up.

They don't recognize him. In fact, quite the opposite. He scares the bejeebers out of them. Ever had the bejeebers scared out of you? Not pretty.

After coming so late to the party, what does Jesus do? Verse 27. He says the very helpful line, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." Which might be translated, if you're Greek "It's me" and if you're Jewish, it's a clue that he is God (who calls himself 'I am' back in Exodus).

Be brave. Don't be afraid. I'm here. But the storm still rages and the boat is still swamped, riding low in the water because it is full of scared, wet, hungry, tired and probably smelly men. Frankly, I was hoping for a little more than just some encouragement. I often hope for more from Jesus than he actually gives me. I know he has his reasons. They apparently hoped for more, too, because they absolutely do not understand who this is, strolling to them and just saying a few nice things from a distance.

Only Peter seems to know it is really Jesus.

I know what my response would be. "It's about time! Where the heck have you been? We almost died! Last time we got into a boat when you told us to, you slept through the whole thing. Now you finally show up after hours of terror. PLEASE do not ask me to get in a boat ever again!

That's what I'd do. Peter, on the other hand, decides the best response is to jump in the water. Verse 28. He's a professional fisherman. Like professional fishermen the world over, across time, he must have just a little taste for danger. Living on the edge, he risks it. He must be pretty sure it's Jesus!

For a while, Peter is indeed fine. He strolls along the waves like nobody's business. But then his fisherman brain takes over, his rational mind that says, 'This can't be happening and who do you think you are to let it happen to you?'

Apparently, Jesus knows Peter can do it. And Peter knows Jesus can do it. But Peter loses confidence that Peter can do it. Peter panics.

My college friend, Patti, and I were hiking down in the Bloomfield, Indiana area one summer. She wanted to take me to one of her favorite places, a railroad trestle that crossed between two high hills, traversing a deep, narrow valley. "I don't know," I hesitated. "Is it high?"

"Kind of, but you'll be fine. It's totally safe. I have walked it a thousand times."

When we got there and looked from the side of the tracks, my heart sank, just a bit. I watched Patti walk confidently out onto the structure; my stomach knotted. The wooden trestle was one track, literally nothing but ties and two rails stretching into the distance, with a small platform halfway across for someone to step off in case a train came while crossing.

Gulping, I stepped up onto the track and began to walk carefully. Up ahead, she chatted away as if I was right behind her, so I followed her back. I walked about 10 steps, and then I looked down. Down between the ties, where there was absolutely nothing but air and a great view of the ground, too far below for my comfort. Brain cramp! I stalled. I could not move. I could not speak. Patti was striding farther and farther away.

“Don’t look down!” she hollered, almost to the platform. I was still frozen. I would still be there to this day, if Patti hadn’t turned around and seen my face, my mouth making ‘help me’ motions even though no sound came out. “Sit down,” she suggested helpfully. I remained frozen. “Ok, just kneel.” Why is it that every suggestion she made involved my looking down again? At last, Patti turned around and walked back to me, took my hand and escorted me back to solid ground. If she had not, I am certain I would be there to this day!

For some reason, I did not trust myself. I did not trust that trestle. But I did trust Patti.

Peter cries out for help, and Jesus is there, right there. I like to think Jesus had a smile on his face as he reaches out to Peter, “Oh, you little faith. Why did you doubt? You were doing great, ya big lug!”

Which is kind of nice when you think about it. Jesus could have said, “Look, Peter, I commanded you to get IN the boat, not to get OUT of it. That was YOUR brilliant idea.” He could have said, “Dude, what were you thinking?”

“Here’s another fine mess you’ve gotten me into.” Laurel and Hardy used that line, I think.

Jesus just reaches out a hand and lifts Peter up. Jesus and Peter together walk across the water back to the boat. The wind stops. All is quiet. Then the disciples in the boat know exactly who he is. He must be God. Only God could do such a thing as this. They fall all over themselves worshipping him.

That tells us they’ve matured a little, made some progress in the faith department. In the first storm, they remain terrified and wondering who he is. Now, they know a little better. Now, they understand enough to worship in gratitude and awe. They will need their faith to keep on growing, if they want to truly follow Jesus.

Jesus rescues Peter. This time. But the time is coming when they will have to trust him when rescue doesn’t come. Jesus lifts him into the boat. This time. But the time is coming when the cross will demand more of him and of them. Jesus makes it all better. This time. And next time, it might not go that way. These guys will face suffering, pain, death, fear, persecution, and they will not be rescued from the chaos. They need to trust him completely or they will fall.

In the Hebrew Bible, watery chaos (like the wind and waves) is always a symbol for evil and disorder, disharmony, in the world.

Remember, in the beginning, back in Genesis 1:2? The earth was formless and empty; darkness was over the surface of the deep, watery chaos. It was the Spirit/Wind/Breath of God hovering over that watery chaos that brought light and life. The ancients believed it was only God that kept everything from descending back into chaos, and that chaos was always there, ready to erupt.

Remember the Noah story? Noah and his family are safe in the boat, but what is outside? Watery chaos. God let's chaos have its way, and everything descends back for a time.

Anytime there is a boat in the Bible, the ancients would think about Noah's ark, which became a symbol for the people of God. In fact, churches were often built in the shape of a boat. You are sitting in the nave (from which we get our word 'navy') and I am standing in the chancel (from where the chancellor would have steered).

Matthew knew, Jesus knew, we'd face chaos too. Jesus is not Superman, always coming in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour to save the day. He will face the cross, suffering and death, just as we do. He will be betrayed and abandoned, just as we are. And no one, not the Father himself, will come and stop it from happening. The saving he offers is not an escape from the world's troubles, but a Way through them. He takes our hand, he raises us to new life, he promises to be with us forever.

Will we trust him? Will we trust him not only in the storm but also on the way to the cross? Will we trust him when every fiber of our being tells us he is not with us? Will we trust him with death as well as life, with sorrow as well as joy? Will we trust him with the details and direction of our every ordinary day? Will it be enough to know he holds our hands?

Peter, of all of them, is going to need this faith lesson. Later, Peter will mess up in a huge, big way. He will deny Jesus 3 times. He will lose faith. He's going to need to remember that, when the wind and the waves get big and he has gotten himself into another fine mess, Jesus will still be there. Peter will still be able to call, and Jesus will reach out a hand to him. Not because Peter is so great and strong, but because that's the kind of God we have. He loves us even when we are foolish. He loves us in the boat, and he loves us out of it.

Sometimes, Jesus asks us to go on alone. He sends us into situations that seem beyond us, and he doesn't seem to be with us in the heat of the moment. He asks us to leave the safety of the shore and head out into the world where things are much less controlled than we would like. We often don't want to go.

When we do jump in, we often find ourselves in situations we didn't choose. We live in a time when passionate faith is suspect, particularly passionate Christian faith. Talk too much about Jesus, and people are going to start worrying you are a fanatic. It's only one step to being a terrorist (and some of our brothers and sisters have made that sick and twisted leap).

When we do jump in, we often find ourselves in water chaos that is out of our control. We didn't ask our spouse to die, but they did, and voila! A whole new life we didn't ask for. We didn't sit down and think, "Gee, I think today I'll be attracted to a guy who is not my husband." It 'just happens,' as we say. We jump at stuff we shouldn't, and stay safe in the boat when we could gain so much by risking a little. Even following Jesus sometimes we find ourselves in a mess.

Life happens. We worry when things go wrong. Did I mess up? Did I sin? Is God mad at me?

Life happens, and storms arise. Sometimes because we sin, sometimes because someone else sins, and sometimes just because. We have tornadoes because we live in tornado country. Mosquitoes bite warm-blooded creatures. There are always storms on the Sea of Galilee. And life is full of suffering and pain,

even if we do everything right. Which we can't and don't. What's more, sometimes it seems like God just lets us struggle on alone.

Marcus Borg, in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, proposes that there are four kinds of faith.

- One is belief in certain ideas – it is a head knowledge thing – you agree with a statement. The opposite of that faith is disbelief – skepticism, doubt. In this 'little faith' if you doubt, you don't have anything to stand on.
- Another understanding of faith is faithfulness – the idea of being faithful as a husband is faithful to his wife, even when it is difficult or circumstances would make it seem bad. The opposite of this type of faith is betrayal.
- The third way to define faith is radical trust – that God ultimately has control and is generous, merciful and loving. It is GOD we trust, and faith comes from that relationship. The opposite of this faith is anxiety and fear.
- Finally, there is faith as a worldview. A way of looking at what is that sees, not chaos, but God generously and mercifully upholding what is good. Not a Pollyanna optimism that doesn't take evil into account, but rather a sense that there is something bigger than evil at work, something that can take and transform what is meant for evil and use it for good, something, Someone who transforms and redeems what is bad. The opposite of that kind of faith is seeing reality as hostile, threatening or indifferent.

The first type of faith is rational. The rest are based entirely on relationship. Jesus invites us to radical trust in him, and in God's control of the world. He invites the disciples, not to understand so much as to hold on to the truth that, whatever the storm, before and after, under and over the world is a loving and generous God who has plans to redeem all things. Jesus invites the disciples deeper, another storm and a new lesson, deeper into trusting him, come what may.

This summer, I have three weddings to perform. That is a lot of premarital counseling. And as I've done that, and gone over the vows again and again, I am sort of astounded.

Do you know what we make people promise to each other? We ask them to promise to be faithful to each other until death, 'forsaking all others.' Even the ones who look better to us than our spouse. Even the ones that seem more like soul mates than our spouse. Whether they get sick or stay healthy. Whether they fall into financial ruin or ride the gravy train through prosperity. When we're at our best and at our worst. Staying faithful.

We put rings on to remind us when we're not together that we are still together. They are the outward and visible signs, I say, of an inward and spiritual grace, a gift, that these two will stick together like glue, no matter what life throws at them.

As I went through the vows and rings with one of the couples, I was nearly blown away. God, dear God, it is a miracle that anyone makes it! I KNOW there will be others who are more attractive. I KNOW there will be challenges to this marriage. I KNOW as I stand there looking at them in their beautiful wedding clothes that it will be hard and some days they will want to give up. There are people out there who will see the wedding ring on her finger and look at it as an opportunity to get her to take it off. There will be so much testing. And yet half of them, more than half if the sociologists are right, will make it through.

We keep on doing weddings, getting married, hearing the pastor announce, “Now that these two have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands, and the giving and receiving of rings, I announce to you that they are husband and wife; in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder.

A pastor in the Blue Ridge Mountains put it this way: Faith is not believing X, or Y, or Z. It is trusting Someone enough to hold hands.

Back in the early 1800s, it was legal in many states to own other people as slaves, but it was illegal for those slaves to get married. The slaves, however, were often more moral than their masters. They couldn't get married, so instead they jumped the broom. Joining hands, the two jumped from their old life of 'I'm in it for me' to a new life 'We're in it together.' They didn't know what life held for them. Their masters could still tear them apart and they would have no control over that. They had, in fact, very little control over their future. They just held hands and jumped, trusting God to work it all out.

Next time life invites you into some watery chaos, whose hand will you be holding? Maybe the jump that matters in this story is not Peter's jump out of the boat. He jumps out alone, and while he sees Jesus ahead, on his own it is not enough. When he jumps back in the boat, he's not on his own anymore. He is holding hands with Jesus, and that makes all the difference.

Jesus reaches out a hand to us, too. He will not promise a rosy future, only that our life, ultimately, will be good because God is good. He reaches out to hold our hands, and holds on even when we don't think we can anymore. It is not a onetime decision to have this faith; every day, the invitation stands. Every day, we renew our trust in him. With the right hand holding us, there is no need for fear or anxiety. We can leave worry at the shore and jump into the future!