

**Guest pastor Jay Blackwell presented this sermon on Sunday, August 11, 2002, in Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts.**

# Still More Risky Business

THE LAST TIME I PREACHED AT NORTH COMMUNITY, we discussed the risk involved in living a life of faith. It required us to call each other by name, to speak truthfully to each other, and to be open to involvement in each other's lives. Well, the sequel picks up where the last sermon left off. Once we have decided to live authentically, we get to talk about the risk involved in living a life of faith.

Here is the basic plot summary of today's passage. Jesus and his disciples had some horrible news regarding John the Baptist. John had lost his head, and I do not mean mentally. He had been killed for speaking the truth. Then there was the feeding of more than five thousand people and the lesson about there always being enough for everyone at God's table. Jesus was tired and needed to regroup. He sent the disciples off in a boat and he went alone to pray. The disciples got in the boat and went to sea. They were asleep until a giant storm awakened them. They then saw a figure coming to them on the water. They were paralyzed with fear. Was it a ghost? Was it a person?

All of a sudden, they heard a voice they recognized that said, "Come". Peter immediately jumped up and out of the boat. Much like Snagglepuss from the Saturday morning comics, he ran fast and furious across the waves, not realizing what he was doing. Then, all of a sudden, Peter realized he was doing what he "could not" do and his fear got the best of him. He sank, only to be met by Jesus and given a word which struck at the heart of the matter. . . . "Oh Faint-hearted, what happened?" Peter got back into the boat soaked to the bone, knowing that he had been found. Meanwhile the other disciples were screaming their heads off and asking if Jesus cared whether they died or not. During the whole story, Jesus remained calm.

It would be easy to focus on the details of the story and wonder, "How did Jesus walk on the water?" "Why couldn't Peter do it as well?" "If you or I had enough faith, could we walk on the bay at Green Harbor?" The concept of faith may be awkward or uncomfortable. What do we mean by this word, faith? For some, we may have learned this word as a litmus test of our worth or as an entrance into the family of God. If we have "enough" faith, we get into heaven, become a child of God, or get rewarded with a "good" life. If we pray hard enough, give enough money, or follow every doctrine of the church, then we will be worthy,

we will be cared for, and God will love us. But this misses the entire concept of faith and the point of the story.

Faith is a state or being, not something that can be measured, owned or possessed. Faith is a spiritual practice or discipline that discovers what is true and trustworthy in life. It expands our trust in ourselves and in our God. Faith is the journey lived in the tension between courage and fear, peace and anxiety, harmony and uproar. As we deepen our trust in ourselves and in God's love, our faith expands and gives us a deep ability to remain calm, centered and unmoved. Jesus represented this true faith and courage in the story, as He was able to "walk" over the waves. He was not swayed by the crashing of the waves, as was Peter.

Peter saw the "real" danger around him. Peter's fear was not imagined or perceived, the waves were real. There is often a real fear or anxiety present in life as well. We may have fear of illness, abandonment, criticism, pain, and poverty to name a few. What are some other REAL fears in life?

One thing to remember in life is that fear does not ALWAYS mean danger. Fear may mean that we simply need to pay attention; that something is out of balance and needs our care. Fear is asking us to pay attention and indicating that take some time and wait, watch and see what is going on around us. It is a warning that we need to get still and find our center. Let's look again at the story.

Jesus had gone away to find his center after several exhausting events. And the disciples had done the same, up to a point. Then the storm came and they were overtaken with a paralyzing fear. Only one had the courage to move. It takes courage and a sense of self to rush out of the boat while still remaining aware of the storm around. Peter displayed this courage as he dashed out of the boat and did fine. He made progress and ran toward Jesus, not away as if scared by a ghost. He approached his fear. But then he allowed another sense of impending danger to cloud his sense of security and stability. He panicked, as we often do, and went under. The beauty of the story is that he was met and loved back into the boat. Jesus' words were not meant to shame or scold Peter, rather to call forth courage in a young believer. He called him a nickname or term of endearment – "Faint heart". It is much like we call Lola, "Stinky".

Jesus says it takes great courage to live life. It takes courage to trust in yourself and the truth you know and make decisions that affect your life and the lives of those around you. It takes courage to get out of the "boat" and run toward that which scares you. I am reminded of the words from a Garth Brooks song entitled, "Standing Outside the Fire." He sings, "Life is not tried, it is merely survived, if you're standing outside the fire." Life is like a crucible and will call forth every ounce of strength and resolve to withstand the heat. You've often heard the phrase, "If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen." There is

some truth to this saying. Life is tough at times and it requires great courage. Courage, peace, and harmony to face whatever we know is waiting and sometimes what we could never imagine.

So what does this story mean for us today? How do we walk on the storms of our life around us? When waves of propaganda, corporate failure, security alarms, disease, religious abuse and scandal, threaten to drown us, what do we do? When addictions, feelings of worthlessness and self-pity surround us, how can we find courage to "walk" on these waves? How can we say, "I am at peace. It is well with my soul."

Here is where we connect to the sermon in April. Faith requires us to risk opening ourselves to those around us and to God's love that comes to us over and over every day. Faith calls us to risk being aware of the situations around us and not play "Pollyanna", or not to live in a big river of denial. Faith calls us to feel our own fragility, to face our fears head-on and to courageously get out of the boat.

As we become able to accept the waves that come into our life, regardless of whether we are given pain or pleasure, sorrow or joy, we become confident in our strength, our resilience, and in the love of God. As we realize we are loved, we realize our worth and begin to reach out to others. Listen to the words from a familiar hymn, *For the Fruit of All Creation*. It is most often sung at Thanksgiving for good reason, but a phrase from the last verse is important to us today:

"For the wonders that astound us, for the truths that  
still confound us, Most of all that Love has found us,  
Thanks be to God."

In the midst of the storms and waves that are pounding us and those around us daily, may we know that we have been found by the love that never ends. May we know that nothing can separate us from this love and allow that knowledge and security to encourage and support each other. May we have the courage to step out of the boat, face our fears, and get wet. Because you know it will happen.