

August 10, 2008
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Like a Rock

Psalm 63: 1-8 and Matthew 14: 22-33

Please pray with me: Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

The gospel story we hear this morning makes great art – perhaps you have seen Tintoretto’s famous painting of the ghostly Jesus, nimbus around his head, striding across the chaotic water to the boat precariously on the crest of an impossibly large wave... it’s an icon of early renaissance art, an image reproduced in prints and in every art history textbook ever printed. This is also a familiar story from our early Sunday school days: Jesus defying gravity and demonstrating super-hero powers over the ocean waves and the winds – a life-saver literally to the vacillating Peter: now challenging and confident; now spooked and sinking, *saving* Peter, the dumb-as-rocks disciple who climbs out of the boat.

Peter – who a few short chapters later will be nicknamed “The Rock” by Jesus who says: “on this rock (Peter) my church will be built (Mt 16:18). Here, in this passage, Peter is up to his neck, and he’s petrified; scared out of his wits and sinking like a stone.

He’s done something impetuous again – taken an unwarranted risk. His challenge, “*if it is you, Lord....*” immediately calls us back to the time at the very start of Jesus’ ministry, when it was Jesus who was up to his neck, over his head in the water of the Jordan river in baptism through the ministry of his cousin John.... and it takes us to the moment, just after his baptism, when Jesus is super-transported to the wilderness where the devil says things like, “*If you are the Son of God.... If you are the Son of God... do this impossible thing....*”

Today’s gospel reading has Peter sounding like the devil – “*If it is you, Lord, command me to do something that defies all reason; something that breaks the laws of nature and physics; something that will really impress folks back at the fish market; something my grandkids will be impressed with.... if it is you, Lord....*”

Hadn’t Jesus already asked the disciples to do something he himself had implied he *wouldn’t* do? Earlier in the passage, he insisted that they leave him – the verb in Greek is quite forceful – he “immediately compelled” or “drove” them into the boat and “ordered” them to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. This confusing command from Jesus who promises never to leave his disciples, saying: “remember, I am with you always” (Mt 28:20).

Much is made of Peter in this story, and the cycle of risk-taking and failure that ends with the admonition “you of little faith.” These observations inevitably contrast Peter the “rock” with the other disciples, huddled together in the boat; soaked to the skin and scared... Safe? Secure? Or equally witless and wet... and it’s just that they don’t realize it yet!

This contrast in approach of the disciples, Peter vs all the others, reminds me of a story Howard Thurman tells, of a “father *trying* to put into words the basic difference between his two children. At length the father said, ‘The best way I can describe it is to put it this way: when they were babies, one of them always crawled *around* an object that blocked the path; while the other one always tried to *push* it out of the way.’

Thurman says this is not a poor description of two basic techniques in human relations. There are those who seem always to steer their course *around* opposition, *around* those persons or things that standing the path before them. It seems never to occur to them to try to *remove* the obstacle. Sometimes the reason is that it is not worth the effort, because the greatest possible economy must be exercised in getting to the goal. No undue risks must be run that may involve one in the possibility of being stopped altogether. There *are* times when to crawl around the block(age) is the result of a decision based upon a careful analysis of the character of the opposition. It represents the only solution to the difficulty. In a sense, it is a safety-first device. A fine line must be drawn, Thurman says, between a deliberate technique of action such as has been described and a bias in temperament. There are temperaments that crawl around obstacles, a simple behavior pattern, the result of (DNA) and early conditioning. This is what the father said in fact about one of his children. The other method is to knock all opposition out of the way... There is a certain strength in the method which pushes things out of the way so as to keep the track clear as one goes along. When the threat to push obstacles aside causes them to step aside or to melt away. But the assumption that all obstacles can be handled in that manner is obviously not correct. Sometimes a decision has to be made – to go around the obstacle or to be destroyed by the obstacle.....”

Wisdom, determining which approach is better, is a matter of judgment *and* temperament; taking a risk and letting things flow; ying and yang. However, there is a third way, it seems to me. Howard Thurman implies this, too – and this is where I think the predicament of the disciples on the stormy sea expands beyond our childhood cartoon concepts. Thurman says: “Some (obstacles) can be removed only by allowing them to *soak*. To know the difference in techniques demanded is a kind of wisdom that cannot be easily won. It is the wisdom of God.”¹

¹ Howard Thurman, *Deep is The Hunger: Meditations of Apostles of Sensitiveness*. (Friends United Press: Richmond, IN, 2000), page 65.

It's crucial to note: Jesus does *not* castigate Peter and the other disciples, indicting them as if they had *no* faith. Or, insufficient faith. He simply says, "little faith", small faith, immature faith, baby faith. Jesus uses the term "little faith" with the sense of *variability* – as in, "O you of intermittent, wavering faith." That's the kind of faith we all have, on sunny days, when we stop to think about it – and on stormy days, when the going gets tough, we're apt to have a sinking feeling, like a stone.

Which gets me to those emails that get sent around – I receive them, perhaps you do, too. It seems even if you're not much of an email sort of a person, there's always someone in your life willing to mail you a print-out of these well-traveled miracle stories of faith – stories of impossible faith; Hollywood and, in my view, fake faith. Faith wherein every tragedy occurs; every dire illness and impossible circumstance thwarts each person until it's a soap opera, and yet it's asserted that each and every prayer not only is heard, but *fulfilled*. If only you have enough faith, these fictive stories go, *all* things will work out...AND in the best way you could possibly imagine – and certainly before the end of each email.

This is false, of course, not real life as we know it. Idolatrous even, though that's an old-fashioned and harsh word. It's false rather than faithful because it carries a quid pro quo "promise" that is contrary to Jesus' promise. These pretty, and fake stories worm their way into our human insecurities and imply that if we just *prayed harder*, demonstrated faith with louder, more fervent prayer, behaved more like the rich man loudly approaching the temple than the widow with the mite, then nothing bad would ever happen to us. If I, you, we *were more faithful* there would be no incurable cancers; no car accidents; no ruptured relationships; no money worries, no oppressed and neglected people in any of our lives or worlds. These stories are based in what Martin Luther called "works righteousness" – an insidious and discredited theology that says if we work hard enough to make things come out the *way we imagine them*, then we are favored – more god-like as proved by these temporary, ephemeral "achievements", that seem to be proofs of God's favor. Among other difficulties, this puts *us* into the position of defining what "best" is – leaving no room for God to surprise us with something beyond our little expectations, our unimaginative wishes that "things could always stay like this" – living life to the fullest becomes living within the limits of *our* experience and imagination.

Today I think the most important thing to notice about this gospel story is this: Jesus declares the truth of Peter's – and our – little, wavering and uncertain faith... *and then does nothing about it!* Jesus does *not* point to a curriculum or a series of spiritual exercises. Jesus does *not* set performance goals for discipleship improvement. Jesus does not dump the disciples and go looking for better, smarter recruits. He does not instruct them in prayer just then... or tell them to take any other action. Jesus is present with the disciples in the utter adequacy of their faith just as it is – soaking, sopping wet and small faith. Jesus doesn't even offer them a towel! Jesus just makes the obvious observation about the paucity of faith on display – and stands there - all wet. Jesus stands there, with Peter; beside the

wooden boat filled with disciples who are held in the same material on which Jesus will one day hold us all. In this story, Jesus is right there in the water with the rest of us of little faith. While we, we each are like rocks, sinking and petrified stones, soaking... into *calm* created from chaos; in the presence of the one who promised never to leave us, we of little and wavering faith. And that is enough. That is everything. To be wet with Jesus, and to be a little wavering rock – a pebble of faith.