

No Need for Fear
A Sermon on Matthew 14:22-33 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ August 9, 2026

When I moved here in 2016, I immediately felt like Syracuse was my home. I have about fifty reasons for never leaving this beautiful place where we live. One of my reasons is the Central New York Regional Market, also known as the Farmers' Market. Almost every week I go to the Farmers' Market and buy vegetables, fruit, milk, eggs, and meat and talk with the farmers and the bakers and the woman who makes that delicious guacamole.

The other thing I enjoy at the Farmer's Market is seeing all of the people, people from many different nations, people speaking different languages. One of my favorite parts is watching someone with a big smile on their face walking through the market carrying an especially beautiful plant or some other treasure they have found. All the people are glad to be in a place where we can purchase plants and crafts and the most delicious foods found anywhere in the world.

For me, spending time at the Farmer's Market is always an enjoyable, practical chore, and also sometimes a spiritual experience. As I am walking through the aisles of the market, I sometimes recall that all of the varied people around me were created by God in God's own image. At times I am acutely aware that each person carries the light of God within them, and that each one is striving to do the very best they can do, with the life they have been given.

Of course, each person also makes a lot of mistakes. In the church we call these mistakes 'sins', which just means to miss the mark. In most situations, we commit sins when we try to do the right thing, but end up doing something that doesn't help. In the church we have a name for a more serious kind of sins, called evil. People do evil things when they take actions that hurt other people, with deliberate disregard for the fact that they are hurting other people.

When it comes to people at St. Paul's, I'm not too concerned about people acting in evil ways. I can count on one hand the number of times I have seen someone at St. Paul's hurt others with deliberate disregard for the fact that they are hurting others. At St. Paul's, people are trying to follow Jesus' new commandment, that we show that we are Jesus' disciples by our love for one another.

But we still sometimes miss the mark. So this is my question for today: as Jesus' disciples, how can we better understand the mistakes we are making? What is at the root of our sins? What is it, that is within each one of us, that sometimes keeps us from following Jesus' instructions?

Our passage from the Gospel of Matthew is especially helpful for a group of people like St. Paul's congregation. The story points Jesus' disciples in the right direction. This story is portrayed in this beautiful stained glass windows on the north side of the Nave. This is one of the most truthful and relevant stories in the Gospels, because it is a story about fear, and the truth is we have many fears in our lives.

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. Let's notice that in Matthew's Gospel this is the second story where the disciples take a journey on a boat that ventures into stormy waters, but this story is different from the first. In the first story Jesus was with the disciples in the boat. In today's story, for the first time in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus, the one who has been named as Emmanuel, or 'God with us' in chapter one, will not be with the disciples for this leg of the journey.

The disciples dutifully follow Jesus' instructions but find themselves in the middle of a storm on the Sea of Galilee. The boat is being battered by the waves and is far from land. They are afraid the boat will capsize and they will drown in the storm. In the middle of the night they see a figure approaching them on the water. *But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, 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."*

The disciples have many reasons to be afraid. I'd just like to point out, that the disciples haven't really done anything wrong. Yet the disciples have ended up in a situation where they were terrified.

Have you ever been in a small boat that took on water and capsized in the waves on a very large lake or in the ocean? I have. Being on a boat that is sinking under the waves is terrifying. Was it a sin for the disciples to be afraid when they were following Jesus' instructions and crossing the Sea of Galilee in the middle of the night and the waves became very large, so large that they were pushing the boat back into the middle of the Sea? Were they wrong to be terrified when they saw a figure walking across the waves toward them in the middle of the night?

The disciples were not wrong to be afraid. You and I are not wrong to be afraid when our lives are threatened. You and I are not wrong to be afraid in response to the many unexpected challenges and terrifying events of our lives. The problem comes when we take thoughtless, foolish actions in response to our fears.

Peter responded to the fearful situation by increasing the danger. He said, *"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."* If Peter had waited, Jesus would have closed the distance to the boat in a short time, and the wind would have ceased. But Peter couldn't wait. Peter insisted on doing something bold and brash, perhaps even foolish, in response to his fear. That was his big mistake.

The same thing happens with you and me. Our feelings of fear are not always wrong. More often, we make mistakes in the actions we take in response to our fears or in response to our grief or in response to our feelings of shame.

The sixth century Christian known as Gregory the Great observed that there are seven sins that are deadly for us: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. It is deadly for me to have pride or lust, to be greedy or envious or gluttonous. It is deadly for me to be slothful or have feelings of wrath, which means to want revenge against my enemies.

Fear is not one of the seven deadly sins, but people often commit one of these sins in response to their fears, or in response to their grief, or in response to their feelings of shame. Today we see many people who are prideful, which means they think they are better than other people. People who are full of pride might look strong or they might feel strong in the moment, but they are not. They are acting prideful and boastful because they are afraid, or grieving, or ashamed. Today we see many people who are full of wrath and rage. People who are full of wrath, seeking revenge on their enemies, are not strong and intelligent; they are full of fear, they are filled with shame, they are filled with grief.

If you and I truly repent, and want to turn away from mistakes we are making in our lives, we turn back to God; we seek God in our lives. Turning to God works. Seeking God's presence in our lives works because the thing we really need is not more fear, or more grief, or more shame. What we need is more love. When I say we need more love, I'm saying we need to have more trustworthy relationships in our lives. We need to act in trustworthy ways, and we need to be with other people who act in trustworthy ways.

We return to God, day after day, week after week, because we see and experience a whole lot of sin in the world around us, including in ourselves. So we turn back to the God who creates us out of love and for the purposes of love. We also return to the body of Christ in the world, which is the church. As far as I am concerned, a church is only acting as the body of Christ in the world if we are following the simple set of directions that came from Jesus: "Love one another as I have loved you."

We are following Jesus' directions when we are acting faithfully, not acting impulsively. We are following Jesus' directions when we are caring for others, not acting selfishly. We are following Jesus' directions when we act with humility, not thinking that my ideas are better than

the other person's ideas. We are following Jesus' directions when we are acting in trustworthy ways, not acting in manipulative ways, trying to gain more power for ourselves. We are following Jesus' directions when we are engaged in the work and the conversation, listening to and learning from others.

We are here because we want to turn away from our sins, from these mistakes we keep making, over and over again. We don't need more shame, or more grief, or more fear in our lives. We don't need more judgment. We need more love. We need more trust. We need more faithfulness. We need to be together, following Jesus' new commandment as members of the Body of Christ.