

August 13, 2017
Matthew 14:22-33
Pastor Rosanna McFadden
Creekside COB

“Fear Less”

Good morning. I want to talk today about something we all have -- some more than others. A little bit can motivate and even empower us, but too much can leave us paralyzed and unable to function. Most of us have some experience managing this, with varying degrees of success. This description could apply to a number of things, I suppose, but what I want to consider today is anxiety. Anxiety is related to fear, but it's probably closer to worry.

My first thought was to list for you some of the things which I am anxious about, but when I started into that list, my heart started racing and I got a little sweaty and I had to get up and walk away from the computer for a bit. I'm not kidding -- just *thinking about* anxiety is enough to get me feeling flustered. I will share a simple example: I do not have a phobia of public speaking. I don't get sick or lose sleep when I know I'll be preaching or speaking in front of people. However, I like to think that I have a healthy respect for the process. Not only do I respect your time and attention, I don't want to stand up and make an idiot of myself. Aside from even the responsibility of sharing the gospel with seekers and believers, I have enough concern about speaking that I do whatever I can to be thoroughly prepared. I might be a bit anxious about speaking, but I would be *terrified* if I was expected to do it and had not taken time to prepare. In my AMBS preaching class we had to preach an extemporaneous sermon -- that is, we were given a text and three minutes to pull our thoughts together and had to preach on it. Granted, none of us had much experience, and expectations were pretty low, but that was still a rough day. My palms get sweaty just thinking about it. Anxiety can be productive if we can harness it in a positive way, but if we're not careful anxiety can get to be bigger than the problem itself.

This story about Jesus walking on the water is probably familiar to many of you. I suspect some of you even know jokes about walking on the water, and Jesus golfing and thinking he's Arnold Palmer. You'll have to talk to Bruce Barwick for the rest of that joke -- all I told you is the punchline. This gospel account is a miraculous story, but I think its power lies in the fact that most of us identify much more with Peter-- the disciple in the boat -- than we do with Jesus; or even Arnold Palmer.

So let me review this story and highlight some of the details you may not remember. This happens immediately after Jesus has taken five loaves and two fish and used them to feed more than five thousand men, plus women and children. Jesus *makes* the disciples get into a boat and sends them across the Sea of Galilee, while Jesus stays behind to pray. Being made to get into the boat doesn't seem to create any anxiety. The Sea of Galilee is a good-sized body of water; about 64 miles square, or roughly the size of Washington DC. The place where the disciples were crossing was about 6 miles across to Capernaum. A pretty long way to row -- especially since it would be dark when they got out into the lake. But remember, several of these disciples -- including Peter--were fisherman who had grown up on these waters and were used to fishing through the night. Matthew, who was a tax collector, was probably looking around for the Dramamine when Jesus made them get into the boat, but the rest of the disciples were probably just fine.

The Sea of Galilee has a reputation for sudden, nasty storms. Because the land surrounding the lake was a much higher elevation than the water, hot and cold air could collide and cause storms, and it's a shallow lake, which means lots of that wind energy gets turned into wave energy, rather than being absorbed by deep water. The fishermen in the group had to know this, but it hadn't stopped them from working on this lake for most of their lives.

This was a rough crossing. The wind was against them and the waves were battering the boat. But what *really* terrified the disciples was seeing Jesus. In the middle of the night. In the middle of the lake. In the middle of a storm. Who can blame them for thinking it was a ghost? But Jesus immediately speaks to them and says, "Take heart; don't be afraid, it is I." And Peter says, "Lord, if it is you,

command me to come to you on the water.” At which point, I have to stop this narrative and ask: What is Peter thinking? Would that be *your* response to seeing Jesus in the middle of the night in the middle of a lake middle of a storm? How about, “Jesus, get in the boat, you’ll catch your death of cold out there.” Or even, “Jesus, could you tell this storm to calm down? We’re hardly keeping it together out here.” But, “Jesus, command me to come out to you on the water” ? That’s just crazy. And even crazier, Jesus says, “Come,” and Peter does it. Well, he does it for a little while, and then he notices the wind -- and possibly that there’s nothing solid supporting him -- and he starts to sink and calls out to Jesus to save him.

Jesus must have been in arm’s reach, because Jesus reaches out and catches Peter’s hand and says, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” This is the part of the story which fascinates me. Because when Jesus pulls Peter out of the water, where are they standing? Not in the boat. They’re still in the middle of the lake in the middle of the night the middle of the storm, but now Peter is standing with Jesus. What changed? What did Peter doubt which made him sink?

Let’s go back to the opening comments about anxiety. I think it’s normal and entirely appropriate to feel fear in the middle of a lake in the middle of the night in the middle of a storm. If you’re already afraid and then you think you see a ghost, terror is probably the right response there, too. Peter seems pretty confident that it’s Jesus who invites him to Come onto the water. I believe it is anxiety which causes Peter to sink. Not doubt that it was Jesus who called him, or that Jesus had the power to stand on the water, but Peter’s anxiety about what he had just done by getting out of the boat, and how could he possibly do this by himself, and what would happen if he started to sink, they’d never get the boat out to him in time, he was going to die and . . . sure enough, he started to sink. Peter didn’t doubt Jesus; Peter doubted Peter. And for good reason, I might add. Peter had fished on that lake for years. He’d never walked on water before. I’m pretty sure he never did it again. But as long as he was with Jesus -- and *only* when he was with Jesus, he could stand. After they walked back together and got in the boat, the storm stopped. And Peter says, “Truly you are the Son of God!” Peter realizes that it was Jesus’ power -- and *only* Jesus power -- that got them back safely.

I know for certain things that I am anxious about: my children, my health, the future of this church, if I am doing what God wants me to. Also, health care, retirement, North Korea, racial violence. . . I told you the list can go on and on. I'm sure you can relate to these and add some of your own. I do not doubt that Jesus is the Son of God, but I still have anxiety. It's difficult not to be distracted by the wind -- by things I often cannot even see. Even sometimes when we know Jesus is close by and can save us, we still feel like we're sinking. I don't think the solution is to stay in the boat, whatever happens. Those winds are battering the boat, too. Although I think it's crazy, I admire Peter's willingness to get out of the boat when Jesus says Come. I think Peter came to a deeper understanding of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, but I think Peter learned some things about himself, too. He learned that he is not Jesus. He couldn't stand on the water by himself. Most importantly, when you're out in the middle of a lake in the middle of the night in the middle of a storm, it's good to know who can save you. We might be able to stand on our own for a while, but we're bound to get swamped by anxiety and self-doubt and by wind and water that is out of our control. Remember that Jesus reaches out for Peter and pulls him up while it is still the middle of the night in the middle of the lake in the middle of a storm. And as long as Peter is with Jesus, he can stand. That, friends, is a great promise to hold on to. Jesus doesn't save us by protecting us from the storm or putting dry land under our feet or making the sun come out at midnight. Jesus saves us by stretching out his hand and catching us when it's the middle of the night in the middle of a lake in the middle of a storm. It's when we acknowledge that we can't do this by ourselves and only Jesus can save us that we can stand for long enough to make our way back to the boat.

This Sunday we will offer the service of anointing. If you feel like you've been rowing hard against the wind, or are not sure that you can weather the waves for much longer, this is an opportunity for you to reach out and experience the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the prayers of your family of faith. This oil is a sign of the Spirit's presence with you, and of your request for healing, forgiveness, or strengthening of your faith. You don't have to come forward if you're not comfortably doing that in this group; you may always request anointing privately or with a small group of friends or family. Please be in prayer for each person who comes forward; you don't have to

know the specifics of what to pray for. I will invite those of you who wish to come forward and lay hands on them as we pray.

When this anointing service is over, I will invite Hassan Dicks to come forward to be anointed for commissioning into service to God. This is Hassan's last Sunday living in Elkhart. He will be moving to Bethany Seminary in Richmond, IN to continue his theological education in Peace Studies there, in hope that his family can join him there, and in prayer that God will use this time and these studies to prepare Hassan to return to Nigeria to be a witness for peace and to help heal the deep emotional and spiritual wounds of victims of violence. Hassan has unique gifts to share with Muslim and Christian communities. We have been blessed to have Hassan share gifts of friendship and Bible study and music and media with us at Creekside. We want to lay hands on Hassan and bless and pray for him, and we will send him out with a blessing in song at the end of the service.