

August 27, 2017

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

St. Matthew 14:22-33

Jesus' Hand Holds Us Safely So We Do Not Sink

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Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

There are people deathly afraid of water. Or as they like to say, "It is not that I'm afraid of water so much, but that I'm afraid of drowning." The thought of sinking down and water filling their lungs to suffocate them is terrifying. Maybe you know someone like that, or are one of those people. The summer before I started high school two close friends drowned in Michigan lakes within a couple of weeks of each other. At their funerals we wondered how such a thing could happen to such strong, tough guys.

The Apostle Peter was a fisherman by trade. There is no doubt Peter was a strong, tough guy. Commercial fishing was and is a very dangerous occupation. Still, the apostle had a healthy fear of storms and drowning. We know this from the two incidents the gospel writers recorded about Jesus' disciples caught in storms on the Sea of Galilee.

Peter exhibited great faith in obeying Jesus' command to get out of the boat and walk on the water to him. When he took his eyes off Jesus and looked at his attendant circumstances, he became afraid and began to sink. Only one thing prevented Peter's sinking and drowning in the storm. "Jesus reached out his hand and caught him." **Jesus' Hand Holds Us Safely So We Do Not Sink.** We are within Jesus' sight. We are within Jesus' reach.

As Snoopy likes to write, "It was a dark and stormy night." Shortly before dawn, the disciples were caught in a sudden squall about three and a half miles out in the middle of the lake. That is about the distance from here to 465. Jesus had stayed behind to pray. St. Mark wrote that Jesus saw them "straining at the oars because the wind was against them." [6:48]

Jesus walked on the water out to them because he loved them. He had a plan for them in the future that no mere storm could stop. The disciples saw a figure approaching. They thought at first it was a phantasm, or apparition. The disciples believed in the spirit kingdom and mistook Jesus for that.

Our Savior dispelled their false belief immediately. He called to them, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." "It is I" literally translated is "I, I am." It is the same name God used for Moses from the burning bush. Jesus identified himself as the one and only living God; the one who spoke to Elijah as we heard in our first lesson. The name of Lord gave Moses courage before Pharaoh. It gave courage to Elijah against the evil kings of the north. It gave Peter and the disciples courage in the storm. The Lord's name, the one true and living God, gives us courage. We are within Jesus' sight just as all those believers were.

Peter was within Jesus' sight. The sight of his Lord gave Peter the courage to expect a miracle. The "if" in "Lord, if its you," has the sense of "since or because." With Peter in plain sight, and the apostle's eyes fixed on Jesus Peter "walked on the water and came to him."

Jesus' eye is on the sparrow and nothing happens without Jesus' knowledge and permission. We are within Jesus' sight. He always sees us and our attendant circumstances. He sees us when the winds of trouble howl around us. He sees us when the waves of temptation try to drown us. Jesus sees us staining at our oars. The great "I am" comes to help us in ways we recognize, and sometimes do not even know. He sees our needs and through his servants, the holy angels, gives us provision and protection.

Our courage lies not so much in that we see Jesus. Our courage lies in the fact that Jesus sees us. Yes, like Peter we walk to Jesus in the response of faith to his command, "Come." What is more important, what dispels our fears is that Jesus first walks to us in love. Jesus walked in love to his cross and death. Now we step out toward him fully expecting the miracle of the forgiveness of all our sins.

Jesus had Peter within his reach when Peter began to sink. Note that Peter did not reach out and grab hold of his Savior. The Savior reached out and grabbed hold of his sinking disciple. With a deep sense of sin and guilt that brings the fear of death, Peter cried out, "Lord, save me." So we cry out, "Lord, save me." The hand that saves me is not mine grabbing Christ. The hand that saves me is Christ's hand grabbing me. Our Lord reminds us of this with his question, "Why did you doubt?" Looking into the mirror of the law, we can only answer because I am a sinner and if my faith had to be perfect, I would be in trouble.

We are within Jesus' reach. Our Redeemer reaches out to us with the Holy Spirit through the gospel in Word and sacrament. We are within Jesus' reach as we raise up our prayers and confession of sin to his throne of grace. Jesus answers our cry immediately in the gospel that forgives our sins. Sometimes Jesus answers our prayers right away in the way we ask. At other times, he expects us to wait and to accept his answer to our prayers as the better answer.

In the hour of death, do not think about how strongly you are holding on to your Savior in faith. Trust instead in how strongly the Savior's hand is holding on to your soul in the sure promise of love and deliverance. When a child holds on to dad's hand so they do not fall, isn't it actually dad's hand holding on to them so they do not fall? That is why hearing God's Word is so vital and taking Lord's Supper often, and remembering your baptism is vital. Those all are Jesus' hand holding us safely so that no one can pluck us out of his hands.

Peter did not drown because Jesus' hand reached out and grabbed him and pulled him back into the boat. Yes, Peter had taken his eyes off Jesus and then fear stormed his heart. Yes, he cried out for help. But Peter would never forget, and experience again being within the Lord's sight and reach that held him strong against spiritual death.

We are within Jesus' reach. He keeps us from spiritual death. He keeps us safe in the winds and waves of temptation and sin. When we fall because we foolishly took our eyes off him, he reaches out in the gospel, and saves us. Safe again with him we worship him with the disciples and say to Jesus, "Truly you are the Son of God." Amen. <SDG>