

Last Sunday, we read that Jesus had just heard about John the Baptist's death and he goes out in a boat by himself to be alone. The crowd follows him to the other side of the lake and when he gets there he is faced with a crowd of between 5 and 10,000 people. Even though he is really needing some time for solitude to grieve his friend's death, he has compassion on the crowds and with his disciple's help, he feeds the multitudes with only 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. A true miracle!

Today's gospel lesson follows right after this story. Our text begins with, "Immediately, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. After he dismisses the crowds, he goes up the mountain by himself to pray. Finally, Jesus gets some time alone with his Father in prayer.

Jesus stays up on the mountain all night by himself to rest and pray, but in the morning, he is aware that his disciples are still out in the boat in the middle of a storm. Jesus doesn't have a boat to go find them, so early in the morning, he begins to walk on the water toward their boat.

The disciples are terrified when they see Jesus walking toward them and think he is a ghost. Then Jesus calms them by saying, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid." Peter, still not convinced that it is Jesus says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

Jesus, showing his faith in Peter, says, "Come." So Peter starts walking toward Jesus on the water, he's looking at Jesus, focusing on Jesus and then he feels the wind at his back and the rough waves on his feet and he looks away from Jesus and again becomes afraid of the storm. And of course, he begins to sink. He calls out to Jesus in panic, "Lord, save me!" and immediately Jesus reaches out his hand and catches him.

Jesus chastises Peter the way a parent might scold their child for not paying attention to them when they're in danger. He says, "You of little faith! Why did you doubt?"

Jesus might ask us this same question today when we doubt. When we take our focus off of Jesus and get afraid of the storms raging around us. "You of little faith, why do you doubt?"

Why do we doubt? Why do we take our eyes off of Jesus and focus on the storms in our lives instead? The answer is simple: Because we're human. Jesus understood the

disciples fear and doubt because he himself was fully human and also experienced fear and doubt. He too got overwhelmed by the problems in his life, like the death of his friend, John, and needed to get away to be alone and heal. So, he understands our need for healing.

When we doubt and get swept up in the storms in our lives, Jesus has compassion on us, like he had compassion on the crowd in last week's gospel. When we falter in our faith, Jesus has faith in us, just like he had faith in Peter. He reaches out his hand, and says, "Come."

We are kind of like toddlers, we take a few steps toward Jesus and then we get afraid and we begin to fall. We get back up, take a few more steps and fall again. But just like a loving parent across the room from the teetering child, Jesus is there, waiting patiently for us to come to him.

The disciples don't recognize Jesus walking toward them on the water because they are focused on their fear, focused on the storm that is raging all around them. In the same way, we often don't recognize that Jesus is walking toward us, walking with us in the midst of our turbulent times because we are focused on the storm rather than looking at Jesus.

I had a friend in Minneapolis named Marylyn, who suffered from severe chronic pain. She had multiple surgeries and sometimes she got scared and and got overwhelmed by the problems in her life. She would admit at those times that it was hard to have faith and so she asked me if I would have faith for her until she could have faith again. I agreed and we prayed together and I would pray that her faith would return and it always did.

As members of the same family of faith, we can do that for one another. When we falter in our faith, when we get scared and overwhelmed by the storms in our lives, when we take our eyes off Jesus, we can have faith for one another and, we can hold another's faith for them until they are strong enough to pick it back up and focus on Jesus once again. And the wonderful thing is, that when we get scared and falter in our faith, Jesus has faith in us. He reaches out his hand to us in the midst of the raging storm and says, "Come."

The faith of Jesus

The first example of faith is that of Jesus himself. At the opening of the chapter, we are told of the execution of John the Baptist. When Jesus learns of this, he, understandably, has a deep and profound reaction. He no doubt sees his own fate in that of John the Baptist. His faith in his Father leads him to seek solitude and prayer so he can gather strength to face challenges that will ultimately cost him his life. However, on his way to solitude and prayer, he runs into traffic. He is confronted by a crowd — a crowd of people seeking solace and assurance, just as he is. His heart goes out to this crowd, and his faith — the same faith which drives him to solitude, to gather strength for the rigors ahead — this very same faith will not permit him, even just this once, to duck the crowd.

This is the faith of Jesus: When confronted with a lethal threat to everything he stands for, he goes immediately to solitude and prayer, to God his Father. And yet, when his journey to solitude is interrupted by the crowd and its needs, he stops and ministers to them. And his ministry, even at this low point, works miracles — literally; the next episode in this 14th chapter is his



Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

It is among the masses in Galilee that Jesus commences his healing and teaching ministry.

Jesus' popularity as a man who can heal whatever ails a person spreads beyond the Galilean borders. Jesus' newly acquired celebrity attracted enormous crowds; the crowds consisted of the infirm and their caregivers and friends, as well as curious, fascinated, and antagonistic fans and tag-alongs (Matthew 4:23-25; 8:1-4, 19-22; 9:14). Jesus will develop ambivalence toward the constant press of crowds, oscillating between engaged compassion and crowd-fatigue. Most healer-teacher-preachers are energized and encouraged when the crowds show up to receive the gifts of their vocation, but all humans have limits and need boundaries, space, and time for self-

care apart from the crowds and from their inner circle of confidants. Jesus was craving this kind of reprieve immediately before his disciples are haunted by him walking on the stormy sea (Matthew 14:13, 22).

The story of Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee is preceded by the narrative of the feeding the 5,000-plus (Matthew 14:13-21); a healing summary follows it (14:34-36). In all three narratives the crowds play a significant role. In the preceding narrative, Jesus tries to retreat into an isolated place, perhaps needing space to grieve the murder of John the Baptist; however, he is drawn back into the crowd and their needs (14:13-21). Jesus momentarily sacrifices self-care to attend to the crowds. The disciples urge Jesus to dismiss the crowds, presuming that the entire crowd has the means and ability to trek into the city to buy food. This won't be the first time the disciples urge Jesus to send folks packing (15:23). But perhaps, in this case, Jesus' inner circle sensed that Jesus needed some self-care -- time to be alone and relax.

We all variously allow our callings to blind us to our limitations and the long term effects of neglecting self-care. But more importantly, we can forget that we are not God! And when we leave the earth, others will or will not carry on; over that we have no control. When I left home to attend college to prepare for my vocation, it was difficult and painful leaving my mother's side. She was an invalid and I was the only child still home to assist her and look out for her. I cried myself to sleep nights in my dorm room; I felt I should be doing something more to help my mother (even though I was able to obtain work the second day in my new city to send money home). My mother said she just wanted me to be happy. But it was God, I like to believe, who reminded me one night, through my tears, that God can do what I cannot do, in my presence and in my absence.

Jesus, like many people called into ministry, had a passion for the people and sometimes passion and enthusiasm pushes self-care to the curb. A fully embodied ministry is one characterized by self-care. Self-care is a divine gift. Jesus was human like us and could convince himself that there is only one person and one way to fulfill the significant and daunting needs of the masses. Interestingly, our story is followed by a summary of the many crowds that pursued Jesus on the other side of lake. So great is the need and so massive the crowd, that the people themselves imagine a way that this one human being could meet as many of their needs as possible -- by touching the fringe of his cloak. What happens when the fringes wear out?

Unable to escape the crowds, Jesus is so starving for self-care that he sends his disciples away in a boat, alone cross the lake before nightfall. Jesus risks being

stranded without a boat. The narrator states that in the evening the boat carrying the disciples was battered by the waves and far from the shore (Matthew 14:23). Jesus had no boat. And Jesus stayed put. He did not panic; he chose to be fully present in his space and time alone (*monos*). We can't jump for every storm *and* embody self-care too! Perhaps, God has another plan and another woman or man or a way out of no way! Jesus dismissed the crowds and sought a solitary place up in the mountain where he talked to God and rested. After Jesus' spirit, mind, and body were rejuvenated, Jesus arose early in the morning -- refreshed and looking good, I imagine -- and walked on the sea toward his disciples. But the disciples think that Jesus is a ghost. Terrified, they scream. "Instantly, Jesus said to them, 'Stay calm, it is I; don't be afraid.' Peter responds, 'Master, if it is really you, command me to join you on the water.' Jesus responded, 'Come! [if you insist]'" (Matthew 14:27-28, my translation). Peter disembarks onto the water and walks around a bit and heads toward Jesus. Let's be real. Feeding a mass of people with a few loaves of bread and fish is not the same as walking on water!

Peter soon discovers that it is one thing to be battered by strong winds while in the same boat with others. It is a whole other matter to be on the water surrounded by strong winds and all by yourself, without others who share in the same vulnerability. Jesus and Peter were not "in the same boat"; Jesus had evidently walked on the choppy sea of distress for some distance, from shore to boat in the fierce winds. Peter had not. Yes, Jesus chastised Peter when he notices the winds and begins to sink; Jesus accuses him of doubting and having little faith. Sometimes faith is seeing the boat for what it is -- a shared experience and the opportunity to lean on one another, to encourage each other in the storm while waiting on God. Peter was eager to leave his shipmates and to join Jesus, rather than to wait for Jesus to join them in the boat. Sometimes we want our own miracle *at the expense of* others who are in the same boat as us. Jesus reached out his hand and caught Peter, and they both got into the boat with the other disciples. It is when they are all in the boat together with Jesus that the winds calm down.

Few readers focus on the miracle of *Jesus* walking on the water. The spotlight is usually placed on Peter's momentary walk on the water