



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
Aug. 13, 2023
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Little Faith"

Matthew 14:22-33 (NRSV)

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.

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."

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water."

He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Little Faith

Picture a slightly dilapidated auditorium filled with 400 restive young adults gathered for an introductory course on the New Testament. In that auditorium, I am 18 years old, recently moved, at the time I would have said, 'recently escaped'

from the small, 2 stoplight, middle-of-nowhere town in Eastern North Carolina where I grew up. In that hometown, I had discerned a call to ministry in my rural, Southern Baptist Church. Keep in mind that that tradition emphasizes the strength of one's individual's faith – one's call and one's Christian identity rest on the strength of one's individual faith.

So, it makes sense that I would end up in an Introductory Course on the New Testament my freshman year at the University of North Carolina, taught by Professor Bart Ehrman. Many of you likely know Bart Ehrman by his books; you may have even studied his work here at Westminster; his popular titles include *Jesus Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible* and *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question – Why We Suffer*.

Suffice it to say that Prof. Ehrman is a bit of a skeptic, and, as much as I appreciate his work and perspective today, I didn't know that about him when I took his introduction to the New Testament. Some might say, I wasn't ready for what he was going to tell us.

Picture an 18-year-old who thought the Bible was as much history as it was Scripture; Picture an 18-year-old who thought that his call to ministry depended on the strength of his faith - a faith that was going to fall to pieces over the course of a semester.

An example: one day, Ehrman argued that the story of Jesus and Peter walking on the waters of the Sea of Galilee was clearly an allegory meant to symbolize how Jesus supports us during trials of faith. Allegory, as in symbol rather than history; Jesus didn't actually walk on water, said Prof. Ehrman.

Worshipping at Westminster, I suspect this isn't the first time you have heard that or thought that of Matthew ch. 14; it was new to me, 18-years-old, recently moved from my small, 2 stoplight, middle of nowhere town in Eastern North Carolina, where I was told my call to ministry depended on the strength of my personal faith. That semester, Prof. Ehrman taught us about the symbols, contradictions, and even the inaccuracies of the Bible, things we didn't talk about in my home church. It was a wild introduction to the New Testament. I started to sink.

I remember, that semester, reading the New Testament in its entirety; I started to have trouble believing any word on the page. My faith became small. Has your faith ever been small? Have you ever been one of little faith?

What does Jesus mean, after all, when he says Peter has ‘little faith,’ as he lifts his disciple from the depths?

Some might say he’s being a bit harsh.

Following the miraculous feeding of the 5,000, Jesus sends the disciples away on a boat so he can escape to the mountain to pray. While out on the water, the NRSV translation says the boat was “battered by the waves,” “far from land.” The Greek word used to describe what the waves were doing to the boat carries connotations of torture and harassment. The Gospel of Mark, in its recounting of this story, even adds the detail that the disciples were “straining at the oars.”

And they’d been doing so all night. V. 25 says it was early morning before Jesus came to them. In fact, it is the 4th watch, meaning sometime between 3-6am. The disciples are exhausted, frightened, close to death.

The language of the text is meant to echo the Hebrew Bible. You might think of:

- the flood of Genesis;
- the plight of Jonah;
- Psalm 69, that begins, “Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold.”

And Jesus walks towards the disciples in their plight, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Peter, in his haste, says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water,” and Peter walks on water toward Jesus, but noticing “the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me.” And Jesus immediately reached out his hand, “saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’” Little faith.

After, Jesus hoists Peter into the boat, the disciples together worship Jesus. The winds immediately cease.

Again, one hears echoes of Hebrew scripture:

Job 26 – “By the Lord’s power, God stilled the sea.”

Psalm 89 – “You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them.”

The point of the passage, then, is not so much about its historicity, it is about the faith that the gospel calls us to: Little faith.

Have you ever had little faith?

With Peter, little faith calls out in the midst of uncertainty or frustration. It's the opposite of religious pride or boasting. It's more a cry in the dark. It's what we do, perhaps,

- When we experience the hottest summer this planet has ever seen, and deadly fires and storms rise, *literally* this week. Beloved trees, beloved roofs fall, and you get stuck in the mire of loss, insurance claims, uncertainty.
- Little faith happens when trusted answers and assumptions become no longer sufficient. One of the things that made me feel so called to Westminster was knowing that this is a community that lives into the mysteries, rather than the pat answers of the faith. Little faith doesn't boast of its certainty; it finds life in the struggle.
- And the cry in the dark that is little faith appears also when change happens, especially in cherished places of support and community. I know change and challenge have been a part this community for some time now, and here is a new change. Even in the call of a new minister, a joyful change, that joy can intertwine with uncertainty, in a new beginning.

Maybe Jesus is being a bit harsh when he called Peter one of little faith.

But notice, in the remark, Jesus doesn't walk away from his disciple with little faith; he is walking toward the boat battered by the waves, walking toward those with little faith. As soon as Peter starts to sink, Jesus reaches out his hand.

"Little faith" is not so much a fault, as it is a promise; not a deficiency so much as an opportunity. For we see the love of God surrounding those with little faith.

I am with you today not in spite of, but precisely *because* I had my faith made small, in that classroom, yes, but more-so in countless other experiences along the way. And as my faith became little, I learned that faith is so much more than just one individual's capacity to tough it out and believe without doubt or question.

My faith had to become small for me to learn that I was not alone.

In the midst of those storms, past and present, a handful of faith-filled congregations picked me up and held me. They served as the hands of Christ, showing me it is okay to believe, and to doubt, and that most of the time, we do both of these, believing and doubting, hoping and struggling, at the same time.

That is what the church does. All of us collectively are simultaneously Peter and Jesus together, Peter and Jesus to one another, pulling one another up, with the Spirit of Christ in our midst.

In my final dinner with the PNC before they extended the call, we were sitting in an upstairs room downtown off of Gay Street. It was a celebratory atmosphere; there was laughter and great food. You could tell the PNC had bonded over the months, in the ease they felt with one another.

During the dinner, I overheard two of the PNC members have the briefest of conversations; it was a conversation that told me more about Westminster than a Ministry Information Form ever could. I won't tell you their names, but I will probably give them away when I say they are both younger than I am. We were eating, and one paused the other mid-meal, and, pointing at a small, seemingly insignificant roped bracelet around her wrist, he asked, "Is that what I think it is?" And when she responded, "yes," he pointed at his own wrist, with an identical roped bracelet, and said, "Me too, me too."

It wasn't until I was preparing for this sermon, and I went back on YouTube to watch the Easter service of 2022 that I understood what had taken place. Many of you remember that was Anne McKee's first service as interim pastor here. At the end of her sermon, Anne and the ushers passed out these roped bracelets, explaining that the church is a holder of memory, memory that we are loved by a God who does not forsake us. And that bracelet, like any string you tie around your finger or wrist, is meant to remind us, of the memory, of the promise, that the church, the Body of Christ holds for us.

Fifteen months later, those ropes were still around the wrists of members of the PNC. As they reminded one another of God's promise to walk with them through the difficult and uncertain days of transition and change, a hand pulling us from the water.

Little faith. Little faith.

Little faith is faith willing to leave the safety of the shallows and follow Christ into the depths, even when the road is uncertain.

Little faith is faith that is not proud of its surety or strength, but risks calling out in weakness knowing we cannot stand alone by our own strength.

Because, most of all, little faith is a faith that we do not practice alone. We pull one another up, as God travels with us and gives us the strength to pull one another up.

When you find yourself with little faith, cherish it, because that means Christ, in body and in Spirit, is near. Amen. Amen.