

My job as a preacher is to stay true to the text in front of me. I am to read and study and pray on what God would have me say in light of the scripture appointed for any given day. It is no small task. It is an honor, and at times a burden. I am not sure which is stronger in me this morning; the honor or the burden. To restate Paul's words from his Second Letter to the Corinthians this morning, I earnestly want to be sure I put no obstacle in anyone's way to their acceptance of God's grace. I am also aware that one of the biggest mistakes a preacher can make is to get in the way of what God would have preached; to make oneself the center of the text is as deadly as not paying attention to the text in the first place. So, please forgive me as I meander through this sermon. It feels in many ways like a mine field and I am mustering up the courage to walk through it as the valley of lilies that God surely intends it to be.

Karl Barth, arguably the most influential theologian of the 20th Century is quoted as saying "Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible." Sounds like a good idea after this past week's worth of news, doesn't it? But I am also aware of the old cartoon of a family walking out of church on a Sunday morning: the father shakes the preacher's hand and says to him "Look here Pastor, you are a fine preacher, but just a bit of a warning, this morning's message got very close to moving from preachin' to meddlin'. You keep a close eye on that."

All this to say, today's headline news and this morning's Gospel lesson must talk to each other. We live in a storm, folks. It's our storm. And we are collectively yelling at Jesus "do you not care that we are perishing?" So how do those words Jesus response with work for you? "Way are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Let's back up a bit and get refocused. Jesus and his disciples have had a long day, Jesus has healed a great many of the people who have come out in search of him, he has taught in parables, and appointed the twelve Apostles. It's been intense. There has been blowback and criticism already. The disciples have had to navigate quite a lot: in many ways they have had to live the old saying "building the plane while flying it". At the end of that day Jesus pulls them out of the fray and calls them to "the other side" of Lake Galilee. Not to get too bogged down here in the minutia of the text, but it says "they took him (Jesus) with them in the boat, just as he was. That's important: the author of Mark does not waste words. When he adds detail like this, we should take note. What does it mean to take Jesus into our boat, just as he is?

He is one who preaches Good News to those in need. He is the one who says by serving the least of these you serve the Christ himself. He is the one who is most interested in how you love with your whole being than how well you follow all the rules. He is the one who commands unclean spirits to vacate life. He breaks bread with whomever he is walking along side. He breaks down barriers and challenges us to make sure we are putting up no stumbling blocks for children, the weak, the poor, the stranger in our midst. This is the Incarnation of God who we are to take into our boat, just as he is.

And, what about that boat, and that lake? This is not unfamiliar territory here. This is the country, the landscape, the home of the disciples. These boats are theirs. They know every inch of this lake. Save Matthew the tax collector and Luke the physician, we are to believe that the bulk of the disciples were fishers of the Sea of Galilee. And all of them, Matthew and Luke included, were from this region. Now, maybe Bartholomew tended to get motion sick, or Thaddeus preferred dry land, but Peter? James and John, “the sons of Thunder”? They were fishers. This was their base of operations. They knew this lake like they knew the back of their own hands.

But they are also tired and weary. They been through figuratively rough storms lately. They and all the others who have been following Jesus have yearned to belong to something greater than themselves, and they’ve answered Jesus’ call to be part of that greater something, and they have found it all quite disorienting, even as they have found it of great spiritual importance. Walking that close to Jesus can be unsettling. Key here is the yearning to belong. I’ve been mulling over all week the universal longing we have to belong, and this idea that we take Jesus in just as he is. I am grateful to the work of qualitative grounded theory researcher Brene Brown and her book Braving the Wilderness: the Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand alone. I highly recommend that book to you.

In it Professor Brown says that in her research she wanted to ask: When it comes to belonging, What are people trying to achieve? What are they worried about? The answer was surprisingly complex. I want to quote a whole section here from her book, because I think it is key to weathering the storms we’re in today. Her research found that people

“want to be a part of something—to experience real connection with others—but not at the cost of their authenticity, freedom, or power. Participants reported feeling surrounded by “us versus them” cultures that create feelings of spiritual disconnection.”

When she dug deeper into what they meant by “spiritually disconnected,” the research participants described a diminishing sense of shared humanity. Over and over, participants talked about their concern that the only thing that binds us together now is shared fear and disdain, not common humanity, shared trust, respect, or love. They reported feeling more afraid to disagree or debate with friends, colleagues, and family because of the lack of civility and tolerance. Reluctant to choose between being loyal to a group and being loyal to themselves, but lacking that deeper spiritual connection to shared humanity, they were far more aware of the pressure to “fit in” and conform. Connection to a larger humanity gives people more freedom to express their individuality without fear of jeopardizing belonging. This is the spirit, which now seems missing, of saying, “Yes, we are different in many ways, but under it all we’re deeply connected.”

A definition of spirituality arose out of her earlier research:

*Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion.*

What does all this have to do with Jesus calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee, or the political and social quagmire we as a country are walking through today? Everything, really.

The power that is greater than all of us, greater than the storms of our lives, is Jesus, the one who calls us forward into community, into ministry, into mission. And the Good News Jesus spoke, and acted out of, and insisted on is that very grounding of love and compassion. While the storms that rage try to pull us apart, separate us into categories based on political ideologies, or country of origin, or wealth, age, status, or any other human-defined “us against them” group, we are to stay faithful to the Gospel truth that love and compassion unites us, connects us, one to another. We are not to fear the storms of our lives. We get to yell at Jesus and ask him if he cares at all that we feel like we are perishing. But we

also must take Jesus as he is. Know he is the power greater than the storm who can rebuke the wind and say to the sea “Peace! Be still!” But, he’s also going to hold us to the task of being faithful. Which is not the opposite of being fearful, by the way. Faith is the tool we use to travel through the fear, through the storm, to get to the other side where love resides. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your being. Love your neighbor as you have been loved by the Christ. Make no excuses for doing either. The world is in too great a need for more of both. That kind of faith pulls us up to a place where we can better see the Kingdom of God. Where we can better see past the storms, even as they rage.

I forgot that for a bit this past week. I reposted an editorial. To be clear and as honest as I can be: I agree with a great deal of what the author had to say. I think it is most difficult to strive to be good, to say you are good, to do good, to want good, and at the same time support a power or public policies that do not do, say or be of goodness, of love and compassion. But I didn’t pay enough attention to the title of the article, and the potential for it to be seen as to separate and demonize. People called me out on that. Some politely, with respect. And I appreciate that. But others were not so kind. The vitriolic slinging of mud and toxic waste was hurtful. We got caught up in this storm of forgetting we belong to each other. That we are to be faithful to the truth that we are inextricably linked to the power of the Incarnation that is ground in love and compassion. So, when in the midst of this storm, I finally threw up my hands-no, literally, I was on my hands and knees, resetting the Camp Stevens labyrinth, in the dirt, and yet another volley of acid waste came hurling through my phone, I looked at it, I got seasick in my own backyard. My head ached, I was mad. I couldn’t figure out how to untangle the weave of bitterness, misunderstanding, lack of compassion and respect I had set in motion. I was afraid I, and those who were angry at me, were doing more damage than good. And, I yelled something to the effect of “Geez, Jesus, do you not care that we are perishing here?”, I might of used some potty-mouth along with. But you get the idea.

At that point my daughter messaged me to say my phone had been butt-dialing her all morning and would I please take it out of my pocket while I was on my hands and knees working in the labyrinth. And, while you’re at it, she said, you might want to just take down that whole nasty conversation on Facebook. It’s not helping anyone. *And Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the*

*wind ceased, and there was dead calm. He said to me, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"*

So, how do we do that, stay faithful in the midst of the storms in our own backyard? Strive to be not afraid. We are most afraid of being separated, of not belonging. We are afraid of the other, the unknown, the foreigner. And we are afraid of death. And that is a really sad state of affairs. Especially for us Christians. Why should we, of all people be afraid of any of that? We cannot get separated from the love of God, and the love of God is best known in our neighbor. So, follow Jesus, without fear. If we give in to being afraid of our neighbor, the unknown, of death, then we'll be afraid to live. Fear ought to never run amuck with our lives. Jesus is not willing to let us fear either life or death.

Jesus is not insensitive to those who are truly fearful of the storms, but he knows, and he wants us to know that the words of the prophet Isaiah are essential to finding the courage to be faithful in the midst of the storms:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor . . . ;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
to provide for those who mourn in Zion--  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,

Oak of righteousness. That's worth striving for. It takes courage to be an oak of righteousness. It also takes knowing when to take down a post that does nothing to unite humanity, knowing when to engage and when to back off and apologize, knowing when to do more listening than preaching. Living wholeheartedly takes courage.

I preached at my friend's funeral yesterday and I spoke about the time he told me "You need to stop saying 'In my humble opinion' immediately. Speak with the authority the Good Lord gave you. Do not apologize for having an informed and well thought out, well prayed through opinion. Do not cower from the gifts God gave you. You are chair of this program

group because you know what you are doing. Now, act like it.” He pulled me up to a higher place so I could better see the glory of God. And I commend him back to God’s care.

Do not be afraid to live, and when it is time, do not be afraid of death. In between, do all that you can to love others as you have been loved. Talk about Jesus. Follow Jesus. Invest in people. Hold the hands of those you disagree with. Look them in the eye, hear their truth and tell them yours. Hold on to your faith like a guiding rod, sometimes like a lightening rod, to everything you do and say and are. Be not afraid. Be of dignity and grace. Be ready to admit when you took a misstep, and be willing to accept an apology from another. Look for ways to stay connected. Back up when you are tired and go across to the other side so you can refocus on love and light when you need to. And, it’s o.k. to yell at Jesus to be sure he is awake and on the job in the middle of the storm. He might yell back. But, you both can handle it. Amen.