
God as Life Giver and Life Limiter

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I've always enjoyed spending time at the beach. It is so full of doing nothing! Reading, running, walking on the sand, napping, lying there watching the waves, listening to the unceasing, steady, relentless rhythm of the ocean.

It always reminds me how consistent and dependable the waves are—how totally out of human control. Could I stop the waves? No. Could I change the ebb and flow? No. Could I alter the tide? Of course not.

And sure, sometimes the ocean is stormy and wild and yet at other times calm and soothing. But nevertheless it is totally out of my puny and pitiful human control. Yes, the ocean, soothing and terrifying, calm and deep, all at the same time. When looking at the sea, I become aware again and again of life's depth—the "deeps" so the speak—and most of all of my total helplessness to alter the waves and how absolutely limited I am and we all are as created human beings. The ocean, the waves, the deeps are just there. It's just the way things are. Like, "old man river, he don't say nothin', he just keeps rollin' along."

The ocean for me is a prime metaphor for the lack of human control; the ocean smashes my omnipotent human fantasies that I'm really in charge; the ocean pushes me up against the depth of human limitation.

The gospel for today is also about the ocean—the waves—the deeps, if you will. It is also about the experience of our limitations. It is about coming up against the limits of human life realistically. It is ultimately about growing in mature faith. It is the story of Peter's attempt to walk on top of the stormy sea. Jesus has been on a brief retreat to pray and his students have gone out in the boat. Then they discover that the wind and the waves, those uncontrollable realities, are against them. And they experience that limitation with great fear. But Jesus comes to them walking on the water and says, "Don't be afraid. It's only me." But Peter, in his usual impetuous way says, "Lord, if it's you, then let me come to you on the top of the water." And Jesus says, "Well, come on Peter. Get out of the boat." So Peter gets out of the boat and tries to walk on top of the water as he's going to Jesus. But then he sees the wind and he is terrified and he begins to sink into the deep. So he cries out. "Lord, come and get me!" And Jesus says to him, "Oh it's such "baby" faith you have, Peter!" And then they together get in the boat. It's as though Jesus were saying to Peter, (and I'm paraphrasing mightily) "If you are really going to follow me, you had better be realistic about yourself and the situation you are in when you get out of the safety of the boat. Sometime you are going to feel like you are sinking, and that's just the way it will be. You are a human person, Peter, you are not God. You are a creature, not the creator. Your feet will sink in the water. You will sometimes find yourself in the depths. So, Peter, my dear friend, in the face of your human limitations, just accept and affirm them, and reach out as best you can to be about God's business, and I promise, I promise, I will hold your hand all the way."

Now, of course, I don't like to reflect on my limitations and I expect that neither do you. I usually declare "good" what pleases me, what supports my aims in life, what lifts me up. And then of course I call "bad" what frustrates me and leaves

me sinking. Sometimes I want to have it both ways""to get out of the security of my various boats that keep me safe and comfortable and yet also to live a rather courageous and adventuresome life riding on top of the mess and the chaos of the waters. But inevitably my desire to be in complete control is usually checked just by the simple facts of existence alone. Or sometimes it's other people and events which confront me with my limitations. However knowing the difference between what we are capable of doing and changing and what we are not able to do or change is one of the tricky things of growing in faith. Riehold Neibuhr's famous prayer states in a beautiful way the mature faith that I think this story is really about. It could have been Peter's prayer as well after the event recounted in today's gospel: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I can not change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Our task then as Christian disciples, as it was for Peter, is to live wisely and joyfully in the presence of our limitations. To come to terms realistically with life and with death""with the highs, but also with the deeps""with the security of the boat, but also the "out of control-ness" of sinking in the storm. One cannot love life and God the life-giver I do not believe, if one cannot accept the limits of life and love God, the life-limiter, as well. I can not walk on the water, but I can learn to swim. I can accept the fact that I can do some things and I cannot do other things, I can control some things, but not others. I can enjoy the beauty of the ocean, but I cannot stop the waves.

In short, I believe that we disciples of Jesus can experience the turmoil and pain of the storm and the waves that are there when we leave or are thrown out of our safe and secure boats. And we can affirm the world of which they are integral as well as the Creator of that world. We can say "yes" to the One from whom we have come and to whom we will return. We can affirm God as limiter, but through whose boundless grace we are delivered ultimately from the chaos and meaninglessness of the dark and the "deeps".

When I was in Seminary, the Dean's son came home from college in great despair and while Dean Trotter was trying to break the door down to his room, the son shot himself through the head and died instantly. It was a terrible tragedy. The Dean and his family buried their son amidst many tears and much rage. Following the funeral, they left Alexandria for a brief stay, and when he returned to the Seminary community, he first appeared at a Eucharist of the gathered community where he preached. I will never forget that day. Jess Trotter climbed up into that pulpit""all eyes on him""total silence""and he looked out at us students and faculty and friends and he said, " My brothers and sisters in Christ, I wish to tell you that I have sunk to the bottom, but I want to report to you as well that it is solid"

It is easy to affirm the giver of life and joy. It is easy to stay in the boat and only expect rather arrogantly to walk gently on top of the water if one follows the calling of the Lord. But to find the courage to affirm the deeps""the limits""even when we are suffering and afraid""is to trust ourselves into the hands of God the limiter. This is the victory of the cross of Jesus Christ. Beyond fear, beyond denial, we struggle to make our own affirmations and to embrace all of what we are and what we encounter in the world as God's creatures and as Christ's disciples.

This morning, you sit in the nave of the church. The name comes from the Latin "navis" meaning "ship". Look up""you're in a boat, but it is an upside down boat. It is dumping you out. But don't be afraid. God knows you can't walk on water! Peter got scared and sank. But Jesus reached out his hand and saved him from the deep. So, my brothers and sisters, don't worry.

Amen.

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