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## *A "little" faith is all it takes*

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**A sermon by the Rev. Buddy Crawford**

**Proper 14, Year A**

**Gospel: Mt. 14:22-33**

During the long hot summers in southeast Georgia my family escaped the heat in the cool waters of the swimming pool, fishing in the shade trees along the Satilla River, and vacationing at one of the nearby beaches. And we spent countless summer days on the lake at Laura S. Walker State Park. Almost every Sunday after church, we would head to the lake. My mom sometimes brought a picnic lunch or grilled hamburgers as my dad got the ski boat in the water for an afternoon with family and friends.

I loved riding in the boat, sometimes lying on the cushioned benches in the front; the sun warm on my skin and the wind rushing over me. But most of the time, I sat in the back of the boat watching my dad and uncle and older cousins skiing. They moved effortlessly back and forth over the water, jumping over the wakes left by other boats. I was 9 or 10 when I asked my dad if I could learn to ski. He agreed and I was excited and nervous all at once. As much as I yearned to get behind the boat and glide over the surface of the lake, I also knew the risk of being in that dark water. The lakes around the Okefenokee are the color of dark brewed tea, and are the homes of alligators, water moccasins, and snapping turtles.

My Dad drove the boat to a quiet part of the lake away from the other skiers to begin my lesson. I slipped on a ski jacket and stepped over the edge of the boat, slowly lowering myself into the water as my brother and sister passed me my skis. Dad jumped into the lake to fit the skis on my feet, telling me to relax in the water and to allow the boat to pull me up. Once he was back in the boat he tossed me the rope, and I held onto the handle waiting for it to get taut as the boat slowly moved forward. When everything was in position dad asked me if I was ready and I shouted, "Yes!" My younger siblings looked on, eyes wide with excitement and maybe a little fear that their turn was coming up soon. The boat lurched forward and I rose slightly in the water on the two skies before flopping face forward. It was a pattern we repeated several more times; my dad offering me instructions on holding the rope and what to do with my knees. His advice was good, but skiing is something you experience with your body and not your head. Eventually, I made it up and began the course around the lake. My family was clapping and shouting words of encouragement and it was exhilarating. After completing one full lap I was feeling a little cocky and motioned for my dad to keep going.

But now there were more boats pulling more skiers, the trailing wakes colliding and making the lake water rough and choppy and chaotic. I became scared as I was tossed around in the turbulent waters; finally losing my grip and plunging into the lake, I swallowed so much water that I didn't think I could keep it down. My dad swung the boat around, pulling up close and asked me if I wanted to go again. But by this time my arms and legs felt like wet noodles, I shook my head and Dad leaned over and pulled me into the boat. And though totally exhausted, I realized it had definitely been worth the risk and was the beginning of years I would spend skiing on that lake.

The story in this morning's gospel is about another lake not much larger than the one at Laura S. Walker Park. Depending on the gospel story this lake goes by different names, the Sea of Galilee or Tiberius, or Genessaret. At its widest part the Sea of Galilee is only seven miles from east to west, hardly a "sea" at all. Our story picks up after the feeding of the five thousand

with Jesus still in need of a little quiet time. So he sends his disciples ahead of him by boat, while he stays to dismiss the crowd. Then Jesus heads into the hills to find a place to pray.

Hours pass while Jesus is in prayer. Around 3 o'clock in the morning the disciples are still struggling to traverse the short distance to the opposite shore. But the going is slow as the winds and waves batter the boat. The disciples must be nearing exhaustion straining with the oars, their backs aching from their effort to push against the wind. Suddenly, out of nowhere, they see a figure walking towards them on the water. At first they may have thought it was an apparition caused by their fatigue. But as the figure draws nearer they become terrified and cry out, "it is a ghost." As soon as the words are spoken Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I; do not fear." Those must have been difficult words to hear, miles from shore in a wind storm, with a man defying the elements and walking on water - even if it is Jesus - how do you calm your fear in a situation like this?

Peter calls out, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." And Jesus says, "come." It's typical of Peter isn't it? He is the impetuous follower, the one who is often quick to speak and act before he thinks. But his trust in Jesus gives him the courage to take the risk, going to meet Jesus where he is in the water. So Peter swings his legs over the side of the boat, and begins to take those first tentative steps towards Jesus. The eleven peer into the darkness, eyes wide hoping that Peter will make it, and perhaps anxious that Jesus might call them to his side also. Then, as Peter is mid-stride something happens, he notices the white capped waves beating against his legs, the water spraying him in the face. And waves of fear come crashing down, overwhelming his desire to be with Jesus. Peter begins to sink. As the sea swallows him, Peter cries out words that all of us have said or will say at one time or another, "Lord, save me!"

It's not hard to imagine what Peter must have been feeling as he fell into the sea. Maybe it was similar to when you were learning to ski, on water or snow, when the surface became too rough or an impediment had to be avoided and losing your balance you tumbled and fell. If you're not a skier then maybe it was when you received your first skateboard, or bought your first set of roller blades, or when you were big enough for the training wheels to come off your bike. You start off a little wobbly and everything is going ok. Then there is the unseen crack in the sidewalk or a bump on the road and you end up falling to the ground and calling out for a helping hand. Over the roaring wind Jesus hears Peter's call and reaches out, pulling him to the safety of the boat and the company of his friends. And then, without Jesus speaking a word the wind ceases and the disciples worship him as the Son of God.

It's in the intervening moments between Peter's rescue and their reaching the safety of the boat that Jesus asks Peter a question: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" For many this question holds the ring of admonition; an indictment of Peter's only having a little bit of faith. But I wonder about this question and the tone of voice in which Jesus asked it. Instead of being filled with ridicule or disappointment, might Jesus offer the question with sympathy and grace? After all he has spent years with his closest followers and is intimately aware of how they live within the ambiguity of faith and doubt.

Peter has exercised his "little" faith, leaving his eleven companions in the boat, risking all to join Jesus on the water. Perhaps Peter's request of "Lord, command me to come to you" was not an impetuous, thoughtless response. Perhaps Peter is uttering a prayer for grace to step into the place where Jesus is, regardless of the danger or the cost. Maybe all it takes is a little faith, as small as a grain of mustard seed, to step out into the unknown, to take a new path, to be with Jesus in the hard places of human existence.

If you are like me then you know that sometimes there is only a little faith mixed up with a whole lot of doubt. If our faith, whether small or great, is something we hold onto and do not use it is of no value. Faith - trust in Jesus - allows us to face the everyday realities of change, loss and illness, depression and despair, pain and death. When doubt and fear overwhelm us a little faith gives us the courage to cry out; help me, rescue me, save me! The good news in today's gospel is that Jesus is with us in the boat and in stormy, murky waters.

One of the earliest Christian symbols for the church was a boat: a place of refuge and safety in a sea of chaos. It is here at church that we gather, bringing our doubts and sharing our faith. Here, Jesus comes to us over and over again in word and sacrament, in the most ordinary of elements; water and oil, bread and wine. If we hear Peter's request to come to Jesus as a prayer, a prayer for us to emulate, here too is where we might offer that prayer anew, "Lord, bid me come to you." But are we ready to hear Jesus say "come?" And will we, like Peter, have enough faith to step into dark, unknown places with the

hope of encountering Jesus?

Amen.

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