

September 10, 2006

Peace

Matthew 14:24-33

This week hasn't gone like I wanted it to. Seems like a bunch of irritations hit all at once. I know that doesn't interest you but it does have an impact on our lesson today. The Bible speaks to us in many different ways. We read into it our experiences, our thoughts, and our feelings. The marvelous thing about the Bible is how the words adapt to speak to us where we are and how we are. When I sat down to prepare this lesson I was kind of down in the dumps. I think because of that the miracle of Jesus walking on the water took on a new life.

We have been following Jesus' actions as reported by Matthew. We have tried to take what Jesus did and find meaning for the living of our life. We read of Jesus feeding the 5,000 that had come out in the countryside to hear him preach. After Jesus sent them home he and the disciples took a boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (really a lake). Jesus left

the disciples and went into the hill to pray. Matthew tells us that when evening came the disciples and the boat were in the middle of the lake, *“buffeted by the waves.”* *“In the fourth watch of the night Jesus went to them walking on the sea.”*

The disciples thought they had seen a ghost. When they determined that it was Jesus Peter tried to walk to him but seeing the strength of the wind he was afraid and started to sink.

Now I have heard or read this miracle story no telling how many times since my early days in Sunday School. I have seen pictures where the artist graphically portrays Jesus walking on the water. This event is not new to me and I am sure not to you. This is the story of a miracle where Jesus exerts his mastery over the elements. Today my reaction is new. This was more than a miracle story it was a message that portrays the more abundant life that Jesus promised.

Waves up, wind up, not a time to be caught out in a small boat. Life can be like that. We sail along before the soft breeze from the South and along come the Northeasterner to upset our

apple cart. I read of this event as Jesus showing us that in living the more abundant life we can rise above the storms that seek to do us in.

I look around at the society in which we live and am amazed at the miracles that flow from the mind of man. We have at our disposal the knowledge that has been accumulated over the years. Knowledge that we call on to create a civilization that our fathers couldn't even dream of. A society when the worst off of us is in better shape than the kings of Jesus' day. Yet in this society that represents the peak of civilization there are millions who are troubled, uncertain and confused. In a word we live in a society wrapped up in fear. Fear of the uncertainties that confront us or fear as to the uncertainties that may confront us. September 11th that we symbolize tomorrow is symbolic of the fears that run through our being. Fear to come to Five Points at night. Fear to leave a door unlocked. Fear of our economic security and perhaps greater than all is the fear of our physical well being.

Some 1800 years ago the stoic Marcus Aurelius wrote, ***“Man must be arched and buttressed from within, else the temple wavers to the dust.”*** One aspect of the Christian religion is to bring us an inner peace, an inner calm that allows us to walk on the waters that seek to pull us under. The more abundant life that allows us to rise above the limitations that confront us. Christianity provides us with a spiritual philosophy that allows us to cut through the darkness that we may walk in the light of hope and peace. I read this miracle to demonstrate in a dramatic way Jesus’ message to his disciples as he made his final preparations for the walk to the cross, ***“My peace, the peace that passes all understanding, I give to you.”*** The peace that allows us to arise above our troubles, our shortcomings, our problems and our fears. It is there we find the more abundant life.

Everyone of us stands before the Creator as an individual creation. As individuals we stand as a solitary and lonely being. No getting around it. We come into this life alone. We will

leave this life alone. As we grow we pick up responsibilities, individual responsibilities, our responsibilities. Within the depths of our personality there is a deep, private place, where we, in our solitude, must face the burdens with which we are saddled, the responsibilities that become ours.

As a part of our creation we received valuable gifts. It is a part of our responsibility to use these gifts, not only wisely, but to the glory of our Creator. Sometime we fail. That deep and private place within our personality recognizes our failures. It affects the way we live, the way we react in our relationship with others. It is here that we need the power to rise over our lack of responsibility. If you will, we need the peace that passes all understanding. The peace that can come through God's gift of forgiveness.

Many people never forgive themselves when they stumble. The guilt tears them up, pulls them under the waves. The guilt stands as a barrier of the full use and enjoyment of the gifts that we have received as a part of our creation.

At the center of our Christian heritage is the truth that God forgives human sin. I don't know how he does so, but I know he does. That fellow Marcus Aurelius that I quoted earlier was questioned as to his certainty that there were gods. His answer: *"To them that ask, where hast thou seen the gods, or how knowest thou certainty that there be gods, that there art so devout in their worship. I answer: neither have I seen my own soul, but I respect and honor it."* The peace of forgiveness, the peace that passes all understanding. The peace that frees us to rise and walk above the waves caused by our own irresponsibility.

As a part of our creation we were saddled with limitations, some physical, some mental. In some ways there is a limitation upon every life. In that deep, private place of our personality we must learn to overcome these limitations. We start to overcome with the knowledge of what our limitations are. It is then we can learn to live above them. The historian Dr. Southall Freeman tells us that the greatest part of the work of the world

has been done by people who are sick or who didn't feel well. We can't afford to let physical, mental, or spiritual handicaps pull us under. It may not be easy but the peace that passes all understanding allows us to live above our limitations. As individual created beings we face disappointments, defeats and frustrations as we travel from eternity to eternity. We set our hearts on something. If we don't get that something or we don't achieve our goal it is lost forever, maybe not by our own doing but because the doors were slammed shut in our face. We can make this disappointment a part of our life, or using the peace that passes all understanding, we can rise above it, put it behind, continue on unfettered.

There is the fear that surrounds us in this imperfect world of which we are a part, 9/11, suicide bombings, shootings, disease, and on and on. Things that can hurt us and for which we are not responsible. A picture of health one minute bedridden the next.

Sarah Flowers Adams dreamed of becoming a great

actress. From her youth she worked, she studied, she struggled to achieve that dream. She reached her goal as Lady Macbeth. Hailed as a great actress her career was cut short by a slow dragging illness that had her bedridden. Inspired by the Old Testament story of Jacob's battle with his limitations at Bethel she wrote the words that became that great hymn, "*Nearer My God to Thee.*" "*So by my woes to be nearer my God to thee, nearer to thee.*" A refrain repeated time and time again at times of death or disaster. As the Titanic was slipping into the freezing waters the ship's band played, "*Nearer My God to Thee.*" The peace that passes all understanding lifts us above the fears and inequalities of an imperfect world.

Disease strikes the land, hurricanes destroy, war kills, seems like tragedy strikes somewhere or another every day. Why? There seems to be no answer to the agonizing cry from those who suffer through no fault of their own. And we go back to the Old Testament and hear the cry of Job, "*Why?*" The poet has God answer, "*Where were you when I put the stars in the*

heavens?” In others words, *“Who are you to question God’s ways?”* This is not to deny our right to question, it is just to say there are no easy answers within our understanding. Out of the question why, Jesus comes to us with a peace that allows us to walk across the waves that seek to do us in. I think the Old Testament traveler who wrote Psalm 121 saw beyond the limitations of his day. Saw that above the confusion, anxiety and fears that we face that there was a strength, a peace beyond our understanding that would shield us from the waves that would pull us under. *“He that keepeth thee will not slumber.”*

The disciples were in a boat in the middle of the lake. The waves beat against the boat. Out of the mist was Jesus walking above these waves. Here was our Sentinel whose eyes never close. In the midst of the fears that surrounded us, of the weaknesses that we face comes the one who does not slumber who does not let us be overwhelmed. *“Courage, it is I, have no fear.”*

Pastor's Message

Even after one has done all he can do concerning those things about which anything can be done, a great part of life is made up of circumstances, events, and chance happenings over which one has no control. Life is, therefore, often hard to bear.

Henry Ward Beecher points up the final issue of every life in these words, "God asks no man whether he will accept life. That is not the choice. You must take it. The only choice is how." Though we cannot choose what life will bring to us we can choose how we will bear what comes.

The elements of a man's character and the quality of his spirit are revealed in how he chooses to bear what comes to him.

It has long been observed that men bear adversity better than prosperity and poverty with better grace than riches. No single experience makes more or greater fools of mankind than the possession of more money than they know how to administer wisely.

The most pleasing and winsome attribute of character and spirit is gracefulness. The highest choice which a man can make as to how he will bear life is the determination to bear it gracefully.

Riches are adorned and poverty is ennobled by gracefulness. To bear suffering and loss with grace is to lift them almost to sacramental status. Plato said a long time ago that a man should live his life with a disciplined cultivation of the virtues "and depart when his time comes in mild and gracious mood with fair hope."

PRAYER

O God, help me to choose to bear what comes to me with becoming grace. Amen.