

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
Proper 14 Year A  
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What risks have you taken for the gospel recently?  
Isn't this a great question?  
It's one we need to ask ourselves individually each day  
and one for us to ponder as a parish.  
What risks have we taken recently for the gospel?  
The question implies following Jesus involves risks  
and it is something to be attentive to each day.  
This question was one of the questions  
your search committee asked me  
when I was interviewing to be called as your rector,  
and I remember my delight at this question ~  
and actually I remember my answer.

This question comes to mind this morning  
because Peter took a risk for the gospel.  
When Peter stepped out of the boat,  
into the wild and chaotic waters,  
and moved toward the living presence of God  
in the form of Jesus,  
he modeled for us the value of risking everything  
to reach out for and then to proclaim the good news  
found in Jesus Christ.

Let's go back to the context of the gospel again.  
We are in Matthew's gospel  
and one of the plot lines of the narrative  
is the disciples' unfolding understanding  
of the identity and power of Jesus.  
Something dramatic happened last week to and through  
the disciples,  
which you would have thought would have forever  
changed their relationship with  
and comprehension of Jesus.  
Our story last week was the one of the 5 loaves and 2 fishes.  
Jesus had just heard the news  
of the beheading of John the Baptist.  
He's distraught and grieving and wants to be alone.  
But he's met by an enormous crowd,  
and his misery turns into mercy  
and he heals them.  
Perhaps first through his message;

then through his compassion, his laying on of hands,  
his prayers for them;  
and finally through his miraculous feeding of the 5000.  
If you look at this story in terms of the disciple's  
unfolding comprehension of Jesus,  
you would imagine this would have been a major turning point  
in their lives.

For the first time,  
they do more than witness a miracle Jesus performs.  
They are asked to be a part of it.  
And they are called to invite others into this miracle.  
Jesus instructs them to feed the people,  
to take the blessed bread and give it to others,  
who in turn can share with those around them,  
who in turn can share with even more ~  
and the church has been born.  
The disciples are engaged in carrying out Jesus' ministry, from this moment forward.  
They are no longer merely onlookers,  
they are active disciples of Jesus.

So the party's over,  
the people are fed and begin to return to their villages.  
Jesus now has his prayer time,  
his time to be alone with God,  
perhaps to give thanksgiving  
for God's power and presence  
so evident among the crowd  
and for the birthing of a group of disciples  
and 5000 men, and women and children,  
who were now empowered through their experience of Jesus  
to carry it forward.  
They were called to proclaim the good news,  
carry the gospel out into the world.  
Jesus sends his disciples in a boat ahead of him.  
Traditionally, the boat is interpreted as the church,  
off to explore new territory  
and to share the good news of the abundance  
of the power of Jesus  
and the good news that brings.

But there are risks involved.  
There always are when something is worth doing.  
In our story, the risks are portrayed by the wind and the waves,  
those uncontrollable parts of nature, which were,  
from the first creation narrative,  
understood to be opposing forces to God,

which in our story represented the social forces of the days of the early church, the distractions, the oppression, the countering forces which pushed back against the church. Forces which are still with us today.

The disciples are huddled together in the boat, watching the storm brew, wondering I'm imagining whatever did they get themselves into. They cower in their boat, uncertain of their safety, not at all feeling very ready to take the risks required of a disciple. With all the years of sailing, there was only one time I had this experience, of huddling in the cabin, uncertain of our safety, not sure at all if it had been wise to have taken this risk. We were in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay and a thunderstorm came up too quickly for us to get to shore. Andrew was a very small child, just over a year old, and he and I were huddled in the cabin and my only visual was Bill in the cockpit, with his bright yellow foul weather gear on, steering our boat to safety, while the winds seemed to be gale forces, and the rain arriving in sheets, and our boat feeling battered around. It's a scary situation to be in. So, even though there were fisherman among the disciples on the boat, I imagine it was not a comfortable nor easy time for them.

But the remarkable thing is that their fear of the storm is not highlighted in the story. That would have been expected. Rather it's their terror at seeing Jesus walking on water that we hear about. Now they had just seen the abundance of Jesus' power, his deep compassion for them and others, his ability to heal and save, the multiplication of loaves and fishes to feed a multitude of hungry people, and yet they could not comprehend this same person was also in control of the seas, for that would have meant, without any doubt, Jesus had the power of God. God was the only one who tamed the seas in creation

to mold the dry land.  
If Jesus was doing it also, he must also be God.  
For further confirmation, Jesus speaks out to them, "It is I"~  
which echoed to them to words YAHWEH said to Moses  
when asked for his name,  
God's reply was "I AM".  
So now they knew for sure.  
Jesus had the same power of God.

I have a feeling their greatest concern at this point  
was not their physical safety,  
but their spiritual safety.  
Being that close to God can feel overwhelming.  
For this person walking toward them on the water had already  
drawn them into a place of spiritual risk by empowering them  
in the miracle of the feeding,  
and it was clear this call to live in a place of spiritual vulnerability  
was going to continue.

They were among the living presence of God.  
All the stories they heard as children and adults  
were that one could never see the face of God,  
and yet here it was.  
They were in the same place of awe  
we are drawn into when we perceive God is with us  
in a very concrete way.  
When our prayers are answered,  
when our hearts are warmed by the presence of God,  
when we feel the Holy Spirit  
descend upon us when we are healed,  
when we receive the blessed bread,  
there is a joy and love that is present  
which is packed full of the enormous and abundant power of God.  
It takes courage and spiritual strength to be in that place.  
No wonder they were cowering in their boat.

At this point in this story, we can imagine two scenarios:  
one is what happened.  
Peter reached out to Jesus,  
he accepted the risk which drew him into the mystery  
of the reality and ability of Jesus.  
He made Jesus' power his own by asking Jesus  
to command him to come to him.  
He knew he would never replace the power of Jesus  
with his own power,

but he knew he was invited to live into and then out of the power of Jesus.

It's interesting, in our last week's discussion of Emergence Christianity, we found ourselves discussing the continuum of holiness humankind finds itself on.

One person raised the question, do we as Christians believe we can reach that place of holiness as Jesus, as a state of perfection or enlightenment can be reached in other faith traditions.

Our story today answers that question.

Peter did not assume he had similar power as Jesus.

He did not imagine he could walk on the water as Jesus was.

He knew however, that he could obey Jesus and that Jesus' power could enable him to walk on the water.

This is an important distinction between Jesus and ourselves and one we must always hold onto.

When we offer healing prayers to others, or when we offer compassion and love to one another, when we show mercy or forgiveness to those who have erred, we are pulling Jesus' power into the situation, not using our own.

It is our complete desire to be obedient to a force of love greater than ours

which allows Jesus to enter into our lives, and we move along the continuum of holiness.

In the scenario told in the story, Peter takes a risk,

He moves toward the living God.

He walks toward the power offered to change the world.

Yes, he gets distracted and succumbs to the earthly concerns of the wind and waves (which could represent all sorts of secular forces we experience today),

but in the midst of his distraction,

he has the power with all to call out for his Lord to save him.

Peter responded to Jesus' command and invitation "Come".

The same command and invitation offered to us each week when we say,

"The Gifts of God for the people of God.

Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you

and feed on him in your hearts with faith and thanksgiving.

Jesus says come unto me.

And we respond, by taking the risk that our lives  
will forever be changed  
and our hearts will be set on fire  
to bring the good news out to the world.  
The presence of the living Christ gave Peter  
the courage to take a risk,  
to be closer to Jesus.  
Peter gives us an honest picture of faith --  
at times we're all hesitant to embrace the light,  
for often the light shines within us  
and we know we need to do some more interior work  
to embrace Jesus.  
Jesus' call "to come" is a call to venture from the unfamiliar,  
to walk in faith, stumbling occasionally,  
but always calling out to our Lord to be saved.

God doesn't promise us  
we won't be in over our heads soemtimes.  
There will be times when we will wonder  
if this is indeed the right path to be on,  
or we'll be afraid for our physical lives  
if we push the social justice issues to hard,  
we may fear failure,  
we may worry that we're dreaming too big,  
or that we will be ridiculed for our trust in God.  
Peter's doubting came when he allowed what threatened him  
to capture his mind and heart  
more completely than what calmed him.  
We may all know how easy that it --  
to allow our focus to be on the fear,  
rather than the force of love and grace  
which is there for us to rest within.  
It's easy to do,  
but may we learn from Peter to go toward that which  
gives us strength and power through love.

Peter realized that faith emerges often  
when we are in over our heads.  
The only real failure happens when we give into fear  
and stay in the boat.  
That's the other scenario which Matthew could have related to us.  
The disciples, including Peter, not reaching out to Jesus,  
but waiting until Jesus conveniently came to them,  
settled the waters, and all was calm and good.  
Yes, that's easier, to see Jesus on our terms  
and allow Jesus to calm our lives,

rather than allow Jesus to stir them up.  
But that's not faith.  
Never taking a risk,  
never going beyond our depth  
leaves us without knowledge of what we may accomplish  
for the kingdom.

The story Matthew tells  
pushes us to not avoid the overwhelming times,  
but to walk into them  
and call out to God in the midst of them.  
When we are overwhelmed,  
when changes come hard and fast at us  
and we're not sure how to keep up,  
when we feel we are drowning in emotion,  
when we doubt things will ever be better  
or that what we've done won't ever make a difference,  
this is when we need to realize God is present.  
God is not a ghost as the disciples feared--  
a leftover fragment of a person once lived on this earth --  
God is real,  
God is providing strength and power to us,  
and God is showering us with resources moment by moment  
for us to discover.

Did you notice in the story that Jesus' compassion catches Peter,  
but Jesus doesn't still the wind.  
Sometimes our chaotic situations don't stop  
when we see God in the midst of them,  
but our souls are calmed  
and that makes all the difference in the world.

What's interesting to me in this narrative is that the chaotic storm, the testing, the  
distractions appeared after,  
not before,  
the divine meal of the feeding of the 5000 men,  
and women and children.  
Could it have been the abundant grace and mercy  
which worked on their hearts during the sharing of the meal  
which drew them into unsettled waters,  
through which they could indeed find real trust in God.  
Do you sometimes feel that way after you receive communion ~  
stirred up and a bit unsettled,  
knowing God is doing something to your soul?  
Perhaps the disciples needed to learn that God  
is not just a God of miracles and calmness and nourishment,

but that God is a God of taking risks,  
for clearly there was no greater risk of God  
than trusting humankind with the presence of Jesus.

Maybe Peter's stepping out in risk taught the disciples  
that God does not just act on our behalf,  
but actually with our cooperation.  
We are called to carry out God's salvation plan for our world.  
As Paul writes in his epistle this morning --  
God is as close to us as the words on our lips  
and the belief in our hearts.  
All we need to remember,  
in order to share this good news,  
is that Jesus will also come, bidden or unbidden to our aid.  
It is not our power, our message, our grace,  
but Jesus' we are encountering, embracing,  
and offering to others,  
and that it requires taking a risk to be crazy in love with Christ,  
to live fully as a Christian,  
as one who navigates and negotiates  
through the wind and the waves of the world,  
to be saved, over and over again,  
by Christ. Amen.