

***The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost***  
***Proper 14, Revised Common Lectionary, Year A***

***August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008***

***Episcopal Church of Our Saviour***  
***Mill Valley, California***

***Stepping out of the Boat***

It's a bit surprising to me that the Church, theologians, or even the architects of our lectionary haven't adopted the custom of putting some kind of disclaimer on today's Gospel reading. . .Something like:

"Warning: do not attempt walking on water at home."

Or maybe, like the fine print that appears along with many car commercials: "Walking on water occurs on a closed course. Professional Christians only."

Or, simply, "Good Christian people: Remember your life jackets."

Or maybe there ought to be something a bit like that liability waiver I sign every time I go to the pool at the Community Center: "Christian living can be dangerous. I agree to indemnify and otherwise not hold God, Jesus, the Spirit, or my sisters and brothers in the Church liable for any consequences, accidental or deliberate, that may arise from receiving the sacraments of transformation, proclaiming the Gospel in my life, or following after the teachings of Christ."

But, then, that would defeat the purpose of the story, wouldn't it? For today's Gospel is all about safety and liability – whether first-century or twenty-first century – and a startling message about where we are invited to go by Christ in our lives.

Our boats are our safety zones, the places we live and work, the familiar and well-trod places of our lives. We know them like some of the disciples knew their own fishing boats: cracks and knots, the shape of the wooden boards, the way the boat leans, the feel of the rudder, how it handles in various weather and water conditions.

We know them, too, as crafts to get to the other side. Many of us treat the Church like this. It's no accident this church building is shaped like so many: an upside-down boat. You're sitting in the nave, derived from the root of the word "navy" and "naval." We show up here, many of us, expecting respite until Jesus returns to us...that this boat, or at least one very much like it, will carry us until we reach the other shore on the journey of life we've been sent.

And then comes Christ walking on the water. Matthew's account of the gospel bookends this story with the miraculous and worship. It seems to me that the author, in emphasizing Jesus' divinity when he does the impossible as only the divine can, wants us to know that this is a story about how God comes

to us -- to us in our safe boats pushed out far from shore. That God comes at us sometimes from the outside, walking on the water, and terrifies our neat and ordered worlds, even and especially when the wind is against us, the waves are high, and we're not sure we're going to make it.

And then we, like Peter, the Everyman of the New Testament, are inspired enough, driven even, to step out of our boat, to dare the impossible, to look at the world through Christ's eyes and even try to be in it like Christ is, defying the gravity of despair and misfortune...yet God gives us no disclaimers, no liability waiver, nor even a life jacket.

Paul insists in today's reading from Romans that we are not in charge of our salvation - even less so that of others. Now when was the last time you heard that in Marin County? Where we are told we can buy everything we need, including all the protection we want, and if we can't -- well, sorry, go live someplace else...

I'll share the dark joke a colleague tells about Tiburon...that the *m.o.* in the water on the other side of Highway 101 is "I don't get to know my neighbors because I might have to sue them!" Ouch. Now, of course, we're better than that here in Mill Valley, right? Or maybe not...

It's one of our elephants in the living room, isn't it? The unpleasant truth about our part of the world even when it prides itself on believing in inclusion. We live in a place where the private, well-kept boats are closely guarded, by threat of suit even, shielded from interference and walls of affluence.

So we have a radical teaching for our neighbors, if not ourselves, a Gospel that makes us uncomfortable being Christian, that demands more of us often than we are comfortable giving. That invites us out of our boats, and we, like Peter, even as we step out, fear we might drown in the sea of need all around us.

But this is precisely where we need to be -- trying to walk on the water and in need of grace. Because our boats, our carefully crafted and well-trimmed and sometimes well-endowed lives cannot save us. And I have a hunch this is why we return again and again to the altar rail for the bread broken and the wine poured, the body and blood, the essence of what we call Christ Jesus.

It's why we feel the challenge occasionally to brave the elements in stepping out of the boat and abandoning apparent safety for something greater, to take risks without liability waivers for our God standing amongst the wind and the waves, creatures, and people of Creation.

I got up the courage at long last a few weeks ago to step out of one of my favorite boats that might be best named "perfectionism." Many of you know this one -- It is a favorite brand of boat in our part of the world. It's as though Marin County throws arms around us in a big bear hug and whispers lovingly in our ears, "Perfectionists? Over-achievers? Workaholics? Y'all come. Come to me. . . Let's be perfect together..." The Episcopal Church also often embraces us and often says, "The Episcopal Church welcomes you. . . you perfectionists. . . We'll even ordain you..." but that's probably best left as a topic for another day!

The problem, as I'm sure you can imagine, is three-fold: I'm not perfect, the world isn't perfect, and the Church -- sure as anything -- isn't perfect, so this little boat of overly high expectations and perfectionism

often leaves in its wake a hard nut of self-inflicted stress, resentment, disappointment, and anger. And all of that leaking out can be a problem for us and our relationships with the people we most deeply care about. So, seeing that at long last in myself, I stepped out, dared to walk in the water, dared God to catch me.

I was offered a referral to a men's group, all struggling with anger, some with addiction, and some with over-achievement. Most of them, it turns out, were there by court order. Not the company I normally keep. In fact, I realized these were the sorts of guys I spent many years running away from or seriously avoiding. So what was I, a priest, doing in a group with "these guys?" It was a bit frightening. Maybe I was going crazy. Maybe I was sinking into the deep waters.

But I told my story, including the bit my growing up in a small Midwest town, always the good boy, the insufferable teacher's pet and know-it-all, the nerd who didn't go out for sports... Well that meant, of course, I was sometimes the target of bullying on the playground, chunked like Joseph into a pit of fear by my bigger brothers.

"And now you're in a room with the bullies," one of the members of the group immediately reflected back at me. That hit me right in the gut. I had felt like I was sinking and then Christ had caught my hand. And what a healing moment it was! This was an opportunity for reconciliation I'd never imagined, but reconciliation I so badly needed to move forward...to be truly vulnerable with people with whom I never thought I could be vulnerable; to learn about the suffering behind the bullying and see it as my suffering, too, and to welcome the healing of old hurts I often forgot were at work inside affecting me, affecting my relationships, affecting my ability to step out when Christ beckons. We were, together, a group of people stepping out of our boats, pushed, even by our faults or the authorities in our lives, and reaching out to Christ in each other for help, of learning the inner peace that comes when we recognize at long last that our boats, however well crafted, cannot save us. And what we need to do most of all is be crazy like Peter and step out: no life-jacket, no disclaimer, no liability waiver, no threat of suit, and cry out for God when we begin to sink.

That, my sisters and brothers in Christ, is where the life of faith begins anew, and the floor drops away from us and we begin to defy gravity. . . where we step out of relying on whatever "floats our boats" and into the impossible work of transformation by relying on God's love for us. Where we begin to learn about walking on the water, where only grace through the strong hands of Christ can hold us up. The tough news is that our faith, like Peter's, is far from perfect. But the Good News is that Christ Jesus is always there to catch us. . . anyway.

Amen.