

August 10, 2008

Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A, Proper 6 (Matthew 14:22-33)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd John F. Herring, associate rector

In today's Gospel, we have a scene of the disciples, fishermen by trade, in a boat without Jesus. The wind kicks up and the waves are battering the boat, which was far from land, and then the disciples see Jesus walking on the sea towards them and they are terrified; they think it is a ghost. But Jesus tells them to take heart, it is He who is with them. He tells them do not be afraid.

Peter, maybe somewhat skeptical, but wanting to believe, tests Jesus, saying, "if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water." So, Jesus says "come." At first it is working. Peter is walking on the water towards Jesus. However, when he becomes distracted, when he takes his eyes off of Jesus, the water and the wind start to overcome Peter and he begins to sink. So Jesus saves Peter and they return to the boat and the water and wind die down; calm is restored.

Who can calm the seas and tame the wind? In the first Creation narrative in Genesis, God breathed God's spirit over the waters and brought order out of chaos. So, it seems pretty clear what Matthew is saying about Jesus here. In Jesus, we have the Son of God, we have direct access to the creator; we have Immanuel, God is with us. This is the one who can bring calm, order out of chaos. This is the one who desires a relationship with humankind, who reaches out and saves us from drowning in the waters. But the Son of God also calls us into the water, the rough waters, and the strong wind. We are called into the chaos for the sake of others. Jesus says "come."

Today we are going to baptize...

In our liturgy, we make many promises. The parents and Godparents promise on behalf of the candidates for baptism to reject the forces of evil and all things that separate us from God. They promise turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as their savior. In short, they are going to help own the faith for those who will be baptized until the baptized are ready to ownership of the faith. We have a part too. We all promise to help the baptized in this endeavor; we then renew our Baptismal covenant with God. In this covenant, we promise several things:

We promise to uphold the teachings of the Apostles

We promise to resist evil and when we sin, return to the Lord.

We promise to proclaim the good news of God in Christ

We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

We promise to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.

These are some strong promises. Sometimes, these are hard promises to keep. How can we deliver on them? We have enough going on in our own lives. We have our own storms, our own chaos. We carry our own baggage, our own problems and often feel incapable of affecting change, helpless when it comes to being a presence for others in their own moments of chaos. We want to stay in our boats. But Jesus calls us to "come."

Come into the water, come into the chaos. We can enter these waters and experience God who brings calm, even joy in the most unlikely places and moments.

Two weeks ago I went with 19 teenagers and several chaperones from All Saints' on a mission trip here in Atlanta. We were called to serve in our city and honor our Baptismal Covenant in many ways. Going into it we all brought our own personal chaos along. There was a lot of uncertainty. Many of us did not know one another, and there were over forty other teens from two other churches in addition to our group. We were out of our element, out of our comfort zone.

Now, imagine this unease and add in whatever personal issues we brought along with us. We all have them, teenagers and adults, whether we admit them or not. Then add in the surroundings we saw each day, urban decay, concrete crumbling, paint chipping, weeds choking buildings, shattered glass, vacant lots, and empty storefronts. Now add human beings who have been ignored by most of society, who are hungry, often homeless and desperate. Let's not forget the working poor, who work as hard as anyone else, yet are unable to make ends meet. It is quite a combination, our personal problems and the sea of problems in our city. I would say we were reluctant at first to get out of the boat on this mission trip. But Jesus said "come."

So, we went and the most remarkable things began to happen at all of our ministry sites. We experienced so many blessings in so many ways.

I cannot share them all with you, but I will share with you the amazing experience we had at a place called Set Free. Set Free serves homeless families with temporary housing, meals, counseling, medical assistance, clothing, and job skills. They also run a summer day camp for children of the surrounding communities. Many of these children belong to broken homes. Many have a tough future ahead of them, simply because they were born into a hard life. They belong to the cycle of poverty and are offered little hope from family members and have few positive role models.

The conditions at the camp were very sparse and the surrounding neighborhood showed signs of urban decay. Those who ran the camp did their best to provide a positive and Christian based experience for the children. They also provided needed discipline to children who were not receiving proper discipline at home. Despite the efforts of the camp, the children at the camp still craved love, attention and discipline.

It seems like it such a simple task, to go and be present for these children; but I could see as we walked in, the hesitation some of us had. We carried in our anxieties and we were aware of the difficulties that these children were facing. It was definitely a moment of departure from our boats into rough waters. Then we experienced some amazing things. The moment we walked in, the children ran to us and began to hug us. They jumped on our backs, grabbed our legs, it was somewhat chaotic, but in a great way. Our teens opened up. We spent the next two days running around with the children at Set Free, giving shoulder rides, playing basketball, throwing the football, pushing them on the swings, and providing boundaries and discipline when necessary. Watching our All Saints' youth was like watching a huge family of older brothers and sisters with their young siblings. The children of the camp would thank them, hug them, and ask if they would come back, saying, "This is the best day ever," and "You're my best buddy." It was so remarkable. We showed up to help and be a blessing and we were the ones coming away blessed with this deep sense of love and joy. Our group loved being there. Watching this, participating in it, was a kingdom moment.

At night, when we would gather and reflect on the day, you could see the joy in the faces of our teens when talking about their mission work, especially at Set Free. They stepped out the boat, out of their comfort zones, left their hang ups behind and walked into the water and wind. They tried to honor their baptismal vows and Christ was there reaching out, bringing calm, joy and peace to all. It was a reminder how great the Church can be, how great living out our baptismal vows can be.

So today we say welcome to our candidates for baptism. Welcome to the body of Christ. Welcome to the Church, a flawed place, with flawed people where amazing things can happen. Welcome to a relationship with God for whom problems are neither too trivial nor too big. God will wash away your sins, restore you and raise you up in the faith. And when you hear the call to enter the stormy waters, fear not; God in Christ is with you, calming the seas, taming the wind and taking your hand. Welcome to the water.