

Pentecost 10 - B – July 28, 2024

“When the winds and waves are against us”

Read Mark 6:45–56 and/or memorize: Mark 6: 50 b

Two men were in a boat in a storm. As the winds and waves rose, the boat threatened to capsize. They knew they needed help. They were not particularly religious men, but decided all they could do was pray. In the teeth of the gale, one of them shouted the only prayer he could muster: “Oh God, you know that I haven't bothered you for the past 15 years, and if you'll just get us out of this mess, I promise that I won't bother you again for 15 more years.”

Unfortunately, that says too much about his prayer life, and little about his faith. For many people, they only call on God when they are desperate. Now, that's not the main focus of this sermon, but it helps us understand it.

Several weeks ago, in Mark 4, we read about a storm where Jesus was asleep in the back of the boat. The disciples prove themselves less than worthy of their calling. In that incident, Jesus directly confronts them when he asks them, "Have you no faith?" In a sense, this week is the bookend of that question.

We begin with a very pivotal point. There is a difference between belief and faith. A man tells the story of when he was younger and he used to go catch sparrows for his mother to make one of those peculiar English dishes called sparrow pie. One of the best places to catch the sparrows was in the cemetery at night, because they would perch on their roosting sites and were easily caught.

One night, while trying to catch the sparrows, he fell into an open grave. The grave was so deep, he couldn't get out. He tried desperately to climb up, but the walls were just too steep and high. Exhausted, he finally sat down in the corner of the grave to wait until the morning when somebody would come and help him.

Not much later, he heard someone whistling. I guess, if I were walking through a cemetery in the dark, I'd want to whistle, just in case. He realized it was his friend, Charlie. At first, he thought to cry out for help, but decided to wait and see what would happen.

Charlie was also looking for some sparrows for a pie. As he kept on coming, he fell into the grave himself. The first boy sat quietly in the grave, as Charlie desperately tried to get himself out, but he couldn't get out either.

The first boy thought he would have some fun, so in his deepest voice he said, "Can't you let a man enjoy his grave in peace? You can't get out of here." Charlie did get out. He thought

he couldn't, but he discovered quite suddenly that he could. There, in a sense, is the difference between belief and faith. Faith enables you to do what you thought you normally couldn't do. There is a difference between believing in Jesus and having faith in Him.

Belief is what you have in fair weather; faith is what you need when the storms come. That's a big difference! You can believe in God, the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ, our Lord. You can give intellectual assent to that because it's pretty easy, that's belief.

Belief is something that you recite in a creed; faith is staking your life on what you believe. Isn't that our desperate need, to trust what we believe, to exercise faith? To want to lay our life on the line, believing that what Jesus says He is, He is; and what He says He will do, He will do.

In Mark 6, we hear these words: "Then he climbed into the boat, and the wind stopped. They were totally amazed, for they still didn't understand the significance of the miracle of the loaves. Their hearts were too hard to take it in."

It's sort of a puzzling verse, until we remember that the disciples had just experienced Jesus multiplying the loaves and the fish, seeing Him accomplish the miraculous. The question is, why would the disciples be astonished that Jesus would come to them and deal with their fears? And Mark gives us the explanation, "they did not understand the miracle of the loaves, because their hearts were too hard. "

Mark is telling us simply that they couldn't put two things together in their minds. They could not join the breaking of the loaves and Jesus' capacity to come to them in their need. The miracle of the afternoon did not last as the basis of confidence for the dark hours on the stormy sea.

I'm going to come back to that point, but stay with our major focus for another moment. The disciples had seen Jesus' power at work, just a few hours earlier, but their belief had not yet become faith, it had not gotten to the point of their own need to trust. So, register this first truth clearly: there's a difference between belief and faith. Faith is staking your life on what you believe.

Now, let's move to the second major focus of our reflection. It's caught up in the descriptive phrase at the beginning of our lesson. We see it in verse 48: "He saw that they were in serious trouble, rowing hard and struggling against the wind and waves."

What a suggestively loaded phrase that is. We all experience times when we feel like “we’re struggling against the wind and the waves.” It is definitely a metaphor of our life. Not much time passes in any of our lives when we don't feel that the winds and waves are against us.

Maybe it's the couple whose marriage has gone sour. They started out together many years earlier, but they have moved farther and farther, apart, sadly, almost without noticing it. It is now as if they were living in two separate worlds. They wake up one day and find that they've lost touch with each other. They don't know whether to go through the struggle of working their way back together or not? They feel the wind and the waves have used up all their resources.

Let me register some thoughts that hopefully will help you when the winds and waves are against you. First of all, realize that everybody hurts. I don't say that lightly, and I'm not trying to diminish the depth of suffering. I think it's important, for perspectives sake, to begin at this point: everybody hurts at some time.

There is a myth that if you're just Christian enough or spiritual or religious enough, life's troubles will pass you by. It just isn't so and scripture refutes it. The witness of scripture is that the rain will fall on the just as well as the unjust. None of us are promised deliverance from the pain and problems of life. So, the reminder, everybody hurts.

That leads to a second perspective. It helps from the beginning to remember that we are human, not super human. To be human, by definition means we have limits. No matter how much strength we have, no matter how practiced at oars we are, sometimes the wind and the waves are too much. We're going to know distress in rowing. Admit that, let it be part of the way you approach life. We're human, thus limited.

A third perspective: having admitted your weakness and that you're not in control, remember that God is. God is in control, and God promises us that He will never abandon or forget us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor, was arrested by Hitler. While he was in prison, he wrote letters and notes to his family, which sympathetic prison guards smuggled out. A friend of his gathered those, and buried them in his backyard, keeping them safe until the end of the war.

Then he published them in a book, entitled *Letters and Notes From Prison*. In one of those notes, Bonhoeffer says, "I believe that God will give us all the strength that we need to help resist in times of distress, but He never gives it in advance, lest we should rely on ourselves and not on Him alone."

We want to remember that God is in control and He is not going to abandon us. But God has a time–table that may not be ours. Mark wants us to know that. The Gospel writers record the story of Jesus and the storm to reveal who Jesus is. He is "the only Son of God, the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth." In other words, He owns the place. He's in charge and we need to have faith in Him.

That leads us to our final perspective: hang onto the words of Jesus: "Take courage. I Am. Don't be afraid." Don't hold onto your emotions; hold onto Jesus. An educated person is not one who knows the answer, but where the answers can be found. A Christian is not one who can make it on his own, but who knows the One to whom he or she can depend to do all things, because He gives us strength.

I said earlier that the miracle of the afternoon did not last as the basis of confidence for the dark hours of the stormy sea. It is not only the disciples who have that shortcoming. We modern disciples have the same shortcoming. We forget what has gone before, the deliverance we have known, how we have been literally saved from that which could undo us, and how we've been comforted. We forget them all in the midst of the storm.

When Saint Augustine was writing about the incident, he said, "He [Jesus] came treading the waters; and so he puts all the swelling tumults of life under his feet. Christians, why are you afraid?" It is the simple fact of life, proven by men and women in every generation, that when Christ is there, the storm becomes calm, the tumult becomes peace and the undoable becomes doable. The unbearable becomes bearable and the person passing the breaking point, does not break.

So, hang onto Jesus, as with the disciples. He sees when the winds and waves are against us. He comes and speaks His unyielding word: "Take courage. I Am. Don't be afraid."

A couple summed it up this way in the midst of an awful family crisis, they said, "We couldn't make it without Jesus." Nor can any of us.

And my dear friends, aren't you glad you don't have to!

Count me in: How will you help others to see Jesus in the midst of the "wind and the waves" of their life?