

FROM BEAR CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
Making the Impossible Possible

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Matthew 14:22-33

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Walking on water, who wants to try? We know it is impossible. We know that without some kind of assistance, some device, we will only sink. And that is the point of the whole story. Without faith in God we cannot survive this life, we will surely sink and drown.

I once had a teacher who mentored me with great wisdom. I was studying this scripture and I was in a very scientific mind set. I said to him that God would have to violate innumerable laws of physics to have Jesus and then Peter walk on water. He chuckled and said, "Indeed God would and maybe God did. But the message, the meaning of the story, is not in whether God can change the laws of physics, but in God's power to make the impossible, possible."

"Imagine," he said, "that this miracle is a part of the early church's belief in Jesus, as it surely was. Imagine that the boat is that early little church in a storm filled world. This little boat, this little church, is threatened by the storms of Judaism's conflict with the Roman Empire. Surely the storm of 60 AD which destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, which murdered most of the nation of Israel, seemed to threaten to capsize the little boat. But Jesus appears to Peter and the others walking through the storm and calming the waters. In midst of impossible survival, Jesus is possible.

"And then Jesus calls to those in the boat that they too can walk on the waters that threaten them. Peter overcomes his fear of the impossible for just a moment and climbs out of the boat and into the water where the impossible becomes possible and he walks on the water."

My teacher invites me to think of this miracle as the miracle of the survival of Christ's church. He reminds me that whenever the church of Christ is threatened, this simple miracle of walking on water brings hope. Whenever the church is persecuted or failing, Christ comes and invites believers to surrender to the impossible, to get out of the illusive comfort of the small boat, to risk everything that far based impossibility might be seen as the truly possible of God.

There are many kinds of storms for our little boat. In some parts of the world Christianity is outlawed and Christians imprisoned or killed, yet it thrives. In our part of the world there is not such overt persecution, but nevertheless Christianity is threatened by cultural forces which would seem to make it irrelevant or even nonsense. Washington State is in a tight race with Oregon for the least percentage of regular

church attendees in the nation. There are many who say that in this modern age of science and reason the church with its superstitious belief in God is doomed.

Yet, my teacher points out, that the church does survive, and in many places thrives. I have sometimes only half jokingly said that the greatest proof of God's existence, Christ's resurrection, and the power of the Holy Spirit is the fact that the church should have died in infancy, and in early childhood, and in adolescence and should be a historical memory studied by students of ancient history. No one but God could make the impossible survival of the church possible.

I have been appointed to Bear Creek to challenge this congregation to "be not afraid" and to walk on water. I have been appointed here to remind us that it is not good enough to huddle in the boat while the storm rages around us, but that we are called to step out of our comfort and reach into the storm with our lives.

Bear Creek UMC should not exist. It began as an idea of a few people and has grown into a multi-talented and faith filled congregation. Bear Creek has been blessed by God with remarkably talented disciples ready for a vast number of ministries. The potential for reaching folks in the storms of their lives with the fearless faith of Jesus is in our grasp and Jesus calls to us, not from the safety of the boat which we have built, but from the thrashing waves and howling wind. Jesus calls to us to reach out and invite others to know our faith in the God of servant love.

And nothing will do but that we, like Peter, take that first step out of the boat and into the wind that we might walk on water to Jesus. And like Peter there will be times when we lose heart as the call seems impossible, but Jesus in great compassion, will reach a hand to us and again lift us to the surface. Jesus will make possible our faith when for us it is impossible.

We have many challenges before us and some are afraid. Attendance at worship has stagnated; many of our small groups have sadly closed themselves off to growth and multiplication; we have a large debt to the conference for the parsonage and the building and the offering is running low.

For a sensible person these are storms worth fearing. But Jesus invites us to be without fear, to rise from the protective comfort of our little boat, to walk into the storm and to walk upon the water.

With a faith in Jesus our challenges can and will be met. With the helping hand of Jesus we will grow in worship, grow in small groups and grow in financial strength so that we transform lives and so transform the world. With the guidance of Jesus,

with a faith that cries, "Lord I believe, help my unbelief" we will continue to grow what was begun in living rooms, and a school. By God's great grace we will continue to live the promise of the early Bear Creek Church and grow more fully in the Kingdom of Heaven.

And with a little imagination we can see that this miracle of the impossible becoming possible is not just about the church, it is about life itself. We should not exist, according to all the probabilities and what we understand of physics and biology. By "we" I mean the whole of creation. We just shouldn't be.

Yet here we are. Everyday our lives defy probability by simply being. Everyday is a day of walking on water. This point was brought home to me by a simple story emailed to me. It is called "Grandpa's Hand."

Grandpa, some ninety plus years, sat feebly on the patio bench. He didn't move, just sat with his head down staring at his hands. When I sat down beside him he didn't acknowledge my presence and the longer I sat I wondered if he was OK. Finally, not really wanting to disturb him but wanting to check on him at the same time, I asked him if he was OK. He raised his head and looked at me and smiled. Yes, I'm fine, thank you for asking, he said in a clear strong voice.

I didn't mean to disturb you, grandpa, but you were just sitting here staring at your hands and I wanted to make sure you were OK I explained to him. Have you ever looked at your hands he asked? I mean really looked at your hands? I slowly opened my hands and stared down at them. I turned them over, palms up and then palms down. No, I guess I had never really looked at my hands as I tried to figure out the point he was making.

Grandpa smiled and related this story: Stop and think for a moment about the hands you have, how they have served you well throughout your years. These hands, though wrinkled, shriveled and weak have been the tools I have used all my life to reach out and grab and embrace life. They braced and caught my fall when as a toddler I crashed upon the floor. They put food in my mouth and clothes on my back. As a child my mother taught me to fold them in prayer. They tied my shoes and pulled on my boots. They dried the tears of my children and caressed the love of my life. They held my rifle and wiped my tears when I went off to war. They have been dirty, scraped and raw, swollen and bent.

They were uneasy and clumsy when I tried to hold my newborn son. Decorated with my wedding band they showed the world that I was married and loved someone special. They wrote the letters home and trembled and shook when I buried my parents and spouse and walked my daughter down the aisle. My hands, they were strong and sure when I dug my buddy out of a foxhole and lifted a plow off of my best friend's foot.

They have held children, consoled neighbors, and shook in fists of anger when I didn't understand. They have covered my face, combed my hair, and washed and cleansed the rest of my body. They have been sticky and wet, bent and broken, dried and raw. And to this day when not much of anything else of me works real well these hands hold me up, lay me down, and again continue to fold in prayer. These hands are the mark of where I've been and the ruggedness of my life.

But more importantly it will be these hands that God will reach out and take when he leads me home. And with my hands He will lift me to His side and there I will use these hands to touch the face of Christ.

I will never look at my hands the same again. But I remember God reached out and took my grandpa's hands and led him home. When my hands are hurt or sore or when I stroke the face of my children and wife I think grandpa. I know he has been stroked and caressed and held by the hands of God. I, too, want to touch the face of God and feel his hands upon me.

Our hands alone are all the proof we need to prove that God can and does make us walk on water. Our faith in God may be young and it may be weak but God has enough faith in us to give us hands, hearts and minds. We may not believe we can walk on water but God believes we can and gives us, even the poorest among us, abundant means and opportunities to love and be loved.

Everyday we get out of our little bed boats and with great confidence place our feet upon the floor around us. We walk into the miracles of the day with hardly a thought that we are walking on the water of the universe. Everyday we breathe without thinking and love without wondering. And whether we say we believe in God or not, we do believe and trust God because God has believed us into being, sustains us with being, and heals us with millions of miracles.

If it is so for the unbeliever, how much more so will it be for the believer. How much greater the wonder and the miracle for we Methodists who cooperate with the Holy Spirit by, as John Wesley advises, avoiding harm, doing good and practicing, with other disciples, the disciplines of our faith in our prayers, study, worship, abstinence and spiritual conferencing.

It is my experience that those who believe Jesus, who lay aside fears of the impossible, who take the step of faith from the illusive security of a small boat and into the arms of Jesus, are made more perfect in their servant love and know the joy of the impossible become not only the possible, but the actual. Those who take the smallest step in faith know the sweet joy of heaven.

God has placed this congregation here and now that we might proclaim this good news to Bear Creek Community and beyond, and

that we might serve with servant love the full creation of God. I remind you of our mission statement: "Bear Creek UMC is to create a diverse family place of belonging for all people and to reach out and make Disciples of Christ." We are blessed, called and challenged to be a people in whom God makes the impossible, both possible and actual. We are called to be a people that proclaim that God calms the waters so that we might walk in grace. May we serve our master well.

Shalom and Amen.