

Step into Chaos
Matthew 14:22-33
August 13, 2017
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

It is good to be here today, to be here with all of you. I don't know about you, but I feel like the world has beaten me up a little bit this week and it brings me comfort and peace to look around and see your faces. The candles on the communion table remind us that there is a presence beyond that which we can see. Having celebrated the life of Richard Welch in this place yesterday, I am struck today that this is a place that has been part of beginnings and endings and everything in between. We have dedicated babies, baptized new believers, married couples in love, celebrated the lives of saints and gathered together to worship here for a very long time. This place has been a huge part of many, many faith journeys. How many of you were dedicated, baptized, or married in this church? What a wonderful place to say yes! I am so grateful we are companions on this journey and that we can both celebrate and console one another along the way.

Today, we continue our "once a month" stewardship sermon series, turning our attention to one of our core values: Spiritual Growth. This series draws on passages from the Gospel of Matthew which encourage us to reflect on what it means to follow the ways of Jesus with regard to our resources...our time, our money, and our skills. I am using our core values (hospitality, spiritual growth, and justice through service) to help us apply the texts to this place and time. Very soon, we will begin putting together the ministry funding plan for 2018. "Ministry funding plan" is a new way to say "budget". Using these words reminds us of the *why* we give to the church...to fund the ministry to which God is calling us. As we put the ministry funding plan together, I have asked leaders to make sure that everything we spend money on relates directly to one of our core values. After the ministry funding plan is put together, we will be asked to fund it. In October, each of us will have the opportunity to

pledge our support to the 2018 ministry plan. And I hope we will all be excited about the plan and the possibilities!

And with that, this morning, as we think about spiritual growth, I would like to talk a little about the spiritual journey of one of Jesus' disciples, Peter. Peter happens to be the disciple whose story has spoken to me over the years. Peter was far from perfect, but he tried, he really tried.

*According to the Gospel of Matthew, Peter's journey with Jesus began in chapter 4 with Jesus' call to Peter and his brother, Andrew, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men and they immediately left their nets and followed him." Jesus' call to Peter completely disrupted his life. From that moment on, Peter's priorities changed. Now, his priorities changed, but that doesn't mean he got things right all the time, Peter, like the other disciples, had a lot of growing to do. He watched and he listened to Jesus.

*In chapter 8 of Matthew, Jesus healed Peter's mother in law. She was in bed with a fever, Jesus touched her hand and the fever left her. This little story is situated in the midst of other healing and miracle stories, all of which we can assume, Peter observed. Little by little, the possibility of God's kingdom breaking into this earthly world became real for Peter and for the other disciples.

Our text today is just after the story of Jesus and the miraculous meal for 5000.

This is Matthew 14:22-33:

²² Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, ^[a] for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But

immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

²⁸ Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind,^[b] he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

*Can you picture that? Can you imagine it? The disciples looked out across the sea and coming toward them was someone walking on the water. They were terrified. Ya think?? I think fear is a reasonable emotion to feel in that moment. When Jesus called out to them, the story tells us, they were not completely convinced yet that it was him. Peter says, “Lord, *if* it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” And so, Peter, wanting to imitate his teacher, hopped out of the boat and joined Jesus on the water, walking toward him. Peter was exercising his new found spiritual muscle. How excited he must have been!

Do you know that feeling? When you get to demonstrate what you have learned to the one who taught you? It’s both exhilarating and scary. It’s exhilarating because, “Look, I’ve learned it!” And it’s scary because the expert is sitting there...what if I mess it up? I wonder if that’s how Peter felt. Was he excited when his feet hit the water and they stayed on top? I wonder if he was afraid as he stepped out of that boat. It doesn’t seem natural to get out of the safety of the boat and into the chaos of the sea.

Here’s the thing, though, if we always stay in the boat, playing it safe, never risking anything of ourselves, our comfort, our hearts, and our neat, orderly lives, when will we practice what we are learning and how will we know if we have grown? You see, life is chaotic...and it’s messy. Ministry, being the church, is incredibly messy. It’s messy because human beings are broken, hurt and lonely. And life is random.

Often, we don't even cause our own messiness, yet we have to figure out how to live with it. And that's precisely when the church, all of us, need to step into the chaos, we have to risk getting messy and we have to risk messing things up, for the sake of our brothers and sisters and our own sake.

This weekend there has been utter chaos in Virginia. White supremacists descended on Charlottesville, holding torches, marching, and shouting hate. They chanted Nazi war cries, provoked fistfights, and with their words, dehumanized people whom God loves desperately. This, friends, was a planned demonstration of racism, in 2017, in the United States of America. One of their leaders, David Duke, said, "This represents a turning point for the people of this country. We are determined to take our country back." For the life of me, I can't figure out what these white men have lost in this country. White men still make more money than anyone else. White men still make up the vast majority of legislators and policemen in this country. White men are still more likely to go to college than any other demographic, and therefore less likely to live in poverty. But whatever it is the white supremacists think they need to take back, it created a very scary, even deadly, situation in Charlottesville.

While I don't know what they want back, I do know what to call their racism. It is sin. Racism is sin. And it would be a sin for me to stand in this pulpit this morning and call it out. White supremacy is in direct conflict with God's desire for this world and God's activity in creating human beings in God's image. It is sinful to think of any person as less than. It is sinful to assume that a person's skin color would indicate that he or she is not smart enough, not motivated enough, not patriotic enough, not good enough to be afforded the same liberties and rights as a person with white skin. Confederate flags are symbols of racism. Hanging them on one's house or car is a sin. The fact that children with black or brown skin are more likely to end up in prison, more likely to be raised in poverty and less likely to finish high school and go on to

college or a trade school is a result of systemic racism and that is our corporate sin.

The white supremacists marching in Charlottesville yesterday would like us to believe that in order for people with white skin to thrive, people with black and brown skin must be held down. But here is the truth, it doesn't matter how much chaos they choose to create, this narrative is not true. In order for people with white skin, black skin, brown skin, any color of skin to thrive, to be whole, we have to love each other, we have to stop racism, we have to work together. Their orchestrated chaos doesn't change that.

So, into this chaos, walked counter protestors. People who risked their safety to say no to racism, to call it out. Many of them were clergy, wearing stoles, praying, putting themselves between their brothers and sisters and harm. One live Facebook video showed the white supremacists marching through the streets while counter protestors sang *This Little Light of Mine*. As I watched and listened, I realized, there in the chaos, amidst the anger and fear, was God. God meets us in the chaos and encourages us to risk some of ourselves on behalf of our brothers and sisters. And when we do, like Peter, we find that something happens to us.

In that moment, when Peter got scared, he had a choice. He could cling to fear and sink or cling to faith and soar. Like many of us, who have room to grow, Peter chose fear in that moment, crying out, "Save me!" And, in typical Jesus fashion, he reached out his hand and saved him. What a growing moment for Peter! He actually walked on water. And what a moment for the other disciples to witness! This Peter, who walked on the water with Jesus, was a far cry from the Peter Jesus called away from his fisherman's life. The fact that he began to sink wasn't a failure, it was a teachable moment! Peter's time with Jesus, watching and listening had planted seeds that were beginning to bear fruit. He was growing. Peter was beginning to truly understand what it meant to

follow Jesus. Sure, he got a little wet, but it is in the risking that we grow.

Looking down the road at other times in Peter's life, we know that his growth and learning continued. And sometimes that growth wasn't easy. In Matthew 16, Jesus, after an encounter with the Pharisees, asked the disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You're the Messiah, the son of the living God." Jesus affirmed Peter's answer and began to talk to him and the other disciples, predicting his own death. But then Peter blurted out that what Jesus was saying wasn't really going to happen Jesus spoke harshly to him.

The Kingdom New Testament, translated by scholar N.T. Wright, says that Jesus said this to Peter in that moment, "Get behind me Satan! You're trying to trip me up! You're not looking at things like God does! You're looking at things like a mere mortal!" More growing for Peter...he was getting some of it right...his response to Jesus' original question, "Who do you say I am?" shows that. But he still had so much to learn. Peter would still make mistakes. We know he would eventually deny even knowing Jesus when he was arrested. We also know the story didn't end that day. Peter may have failed that day, but he was not a failure. It was Peter whom Jesus admonished to care for and feed his sheep in the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John. It was Peter who preached on Pentecost as the disciples received the Holy Spirit. And it was Peter who, as word about Jesus spread, insisted that God's love is for everyone.

God took that fisherman and grew a true fisher of men...a fallible, outspoken, spiritual giant. And we are still partnering with God in that same work today. Our spiritual growth core value helps us remember we are called to continue to grow as individuals and as a community. This week, I ran across a stack of books that represent some of the books our Modern Literature class has studied. As I looked at the books, I was so moved by the depth of spiritual engagement those books represent. I thought, too, about the Serendipity class which meets during the school

year. I love the intentionality that group demonstrates as they study the Bible, learning that interpretation and context matter, learning from each other, discovering that maybe, just maybe, the Bible is relevant today.

Do you know the prayer group meets every week and we pray for this church and all of your prayer requests? One by one we speak your names and the names of your loved ones out loud. We celebrate your joys, and we enter into your sadness and worry through prayer.

And I think about the week of VBS we just hosted and Worship and Wonder...all the ways we teach God's love to our children. I love that we encourage our young people to think about the Bible for themselves, to wonder what God is saying to each one of them and to all of us. These are the things I think about when I think of spiritual growth at Disciples. On the blackboard outside the sanctuary, some of you have shared ways you see our church creating space for and encouraging spiritual growth. Here are some of your responses:

Being constantly challenged to love "the other."

Presenting me with relationship opportunities that require me to develop patience and understanding.

Allowing me to consider diverse theological ideas.

As we consider our ministry funding plan and our pledges for 2018, we must remember our commitment and call to spiritual growth. In the next week or so, many of you will meet in small groups to talk about how you envision us engaging this important core value. So, I want to leave with you this...

Chaos abounds. Everywhere in the world we look there are messes. Charlottesville, North Korea, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Syria, Tulsa, Bartlesville...

This world needs us to remind it that following Jesus means standing with people in the chaos and working to bring about peace and justice and dignity. How are we going to do that? My hunch is we will do it together. We will take a deep breath, grab onto each other's hands, and

jump into the chaos. And when we do, we will grow and we will find ourselves face to face with the Spirit of God. Amen.