

Walking on Water for the Rest of Us
Sermon by Dr. Leah Fowler
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Matthew 14:22-33

Let me begin by apologizing if you came to church expecting today to hear a sermon about how Christians claim Christ while respecting the religious pluralism of the world we live in. That will be a good sermon I hope, but for another day sometime soon.

Today I ask you reach in with me to the Gospel text, and consider what it might mean to walk on water in today's world. I have shared with you before how much I enjoy Stand-Up Paddleboarding. Let me recall for you the first time I tried paddleboarding. I awkwardly crept from all fours to standing up, and once I got my balance I thought, "This is easy." I glided along the water and couldn't help but imagine Jesus, locks flowing as he calmly sauntered up to panicked disciples in their boat battered by the waves in an upset sea. "Cool," I thought, as I stood perpendicular to the water and wondered if Jesus felt the same sensations when he too stood on the sea (which was really a lake).

Then I made it across the harbor, and it was time to turn my paddleboard around. I had barely turned 180 degrees when a wave smashed against my paddleboard. My gut clenched; arms flailing and legs akimbo, I had the grace of a giraffe in a bouncy house as I regained my balance on the board. And just as I found equilibrium again, another wave smashed against my board and *kerplunk!* my sun-drenched body and Jesus-dreaming ego were both dunked into the icy waters. I was not Jesus; I was the sinking disciple Peter, humbled by my mortal limits.

The current heading back to shore was completely different and much more disagreeable than the current leaving the beach had been. But I had to make it back to the beach where I rented my paddleboard, so I braved the choppy waves

and the icy water-- and was dunked a few more times before my feet could finally wade onto the trustworthy shore.

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ can be smooth sailing much of the time:

- When we are in a country that still favors Christianity as the dominant religion, being a disciple of Jesus Christ can feel like smooth sailing.
- When everyone in our household agrees to come to church without rolling their eyes, groaning, or stamping their feet, being a disciple of Jesus Christ can feel like smooth sailing.
- When what happens in our culture seems to match what our church teaches, being a disciple of Jesus Christ can feel like smooth sailing.

But let me suggest that if being a Christian always feels like smooth sailing, perhaps we are not truly being disciples of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we are not venturing out like Peter did onto choppy waters to go where Jesus has gone. “Not fair!” you may say to me; “all those other disciples were still in the boat; they did not try to walk on water, but they were still considered followers of Jesus.” True! But they were also venturing onto the stormy waters, battered by the waves and the wind, because they were in the boat Jesus had instructed them to take to the other side of the sea. They were doing as Jesus had asked of them.

Right now, there are some very choppy waters in this country that are also rippling out across the world. As Christians, we cannot stay safely on the shore. We are in a time when the church needs to exercise moral leadership. The posturing toward violence toward North Korea last week, culminating in the violence by white supremacists in Charlottesville over the weekend require that Christians stand up for the gospel Jesus gave us. **Jesus gave us some direction on how we treat our neighbor that we cannot ignore if we are to be his disciples.** Today’s climate asks that we go a little beyond being a friendly and fair person to those around us. Today’s climate demands that we step onto some frightening and choppy waters as we follow to where Jesus stands and tells us, “Come.”

Less than one week after we remembered the anniversary of the human devastation that happened after the US dropped a nuclear bomb on Hiroshima, the US president threatens toward North Korea “fire, fury, and frankly power the likes of which this world has never seen before.” *Never seen?* Is the President threatening something worse than the A-bomb over Hiroshima? And he continued his posturing throughout the week on Twitter, one unstable world leader taunting another unstable leader. I was in a daze over the week wondering why there was not more outrage. And then when I was at the beauty store in Leonia to buy more hair product, I heard a neighbor share jubilantly to the shopkeeper his optimism about this country’s direction. He said, “the economy is doing great, and our President is ready to finally take care of North Korea and nuke them off the map.” Ordinary people, ordinary neighbors, getting excited about the prospects of nuclear war. What is going on?

You do not have to go to Charlottesville to see extremism in this country. It has been resting calmly right in our neighborhoods, now only being noticed because our political climate has made it socially acceptable for them to take their place in the public square.

Perhaps the President was right when he said there is “hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides.” I bristled when I first heard him say that. Was this like blaming the Nazi-resisters alongside the Nazis for violence in World War Two? Why did he not outwardly condemn white supremacists for the violence they committed and instigated in Charlottesville, VA yesterday? Why did this president, who is so quick to point the finger at Islamic terrorism, not use the words “radical white terrorists?”

But it is easy to look at Neo-Nazi’s, Ku Klux Klan members and skinheads and say, “*They* are evil. What *they* are doing is not normal or acceptable.” What is harder to do is to see and name the smaller, more ordinary acts of racism we see and sometimes commit everyday.

Jesus warned the Pharisee not to point out the speck in his neighbor's eye without first addressing the log in your own eye. I am currently reading a book called *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race* by Debby Irving, and if anyone would like to join me in reading it, please do-- the Presbyterian Church even has published a study guide to go along with it, in Spanish and in Korean as well as in English. One of the important things this book does is to look at whiteness as a culture, whiteness as a race-- not as simply the default norm against which other cultures are defined and evaluated.

When I was in Atlanta recently, I found out that my cousin and his wife had moved from their outer-ring Atlanta suburb to an almost exact replica of their house, but 20 miles further from Atlanta. Knowing Thanksgiving would now be a 40 mile drive from my sister's home in the city center, I asked them why they decided to move. They told me, "Well, within just a few years our neighborhood had transitioned to almost all Indian, and our children did not have anyone to play with."

I could not believe what had just been said. "What, do Indian children not play?" I sarcastically asked my cousin and his wife. "Actually," Christine said, "it's really been hard, because the children come home from school and the expectation is that they help around the house and study. No time for play."

I let her remark go. After all, we were spending time together because it was my uncle's funeral. But I know for a fact that Indian children make excellent playmates; my daughter has a grand time playing with her Indian friends she made at school, as they imagine they are princess ninja fighters. I suspect my cousin's anxiety about their changing neighborhood is common among white Americans. In extreme form, these white Americans take to the street and scream "Blood and soil! We will not be replaced!" But what we think of as ordinary white Americans have a more subtle response. To them, instead of being willing to go against current and test the waters, they cling to their boats and even paddle in the opposite direction rather than experience what might happen out on the sea. But in avoiding stepping out of the boat, they may in fact miss the chance to be part of what Jesus

Christ is doing: calling people of different cultures to each step out of their boats and test the waters of friendship. Sure, there will certainly be cultural differences, and there may even be moments of panicked sinking. But if we can get to the point where we can break bread-- or naan, or rice-- together in each other's homes, we can in fact discover God in one another.

What fascinates me about the gospel story is that Jesus is not the only one to walk on water. Peter joins him; even though he had never done it before (we can assume), even though he was clearly terrified, he stepped right out there to meet Jesus.

As what we call in the Reformed tradition "the priesthood of all believers," there is no reason that each and every one of us Christians cannot try to step out onto stormy waters while trying to follow Jesus. This kind of bold faith does not have to be outsourced to the pastors and theologians. Each believer can try walking on water to Jesus.

I want to encourage you to try to walk on water yourselves. Let's try it together, when the current on the water is calm. Many have been moved by the Christian witness of pastors-- as well as the witness of other faith leaders-- who joined hands in solidarity, singing "This Little Light of Mine," making a boundary of love in the face of white supremacist demonstrators yesterday in Charlotte. But you do not have to be clergy to exercise Christian moral leadership. I would like to invite us to take a time of silence for five minutes or so. I ask that you reflect on where Jesus calls you to "Come" and take a step onto the water to walk toward him. If anyone feels called by a still, small voice, or by the light of Christ inside of you, you may speak a few words. Perhaps using your voice here will strengthen your courage to speak also in wilder, choppy waters, offering moral leadership where it is sorely needed. When our time of silence is up, I will lead us in singing a verse of "This Little Light of Mine."