

Faith over Fear, Compassion over Confrontation, Hope over Hate

A message by Elder David Hensel

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

August 9, 2020

- **Gospel Matthew 14:22-33 (English Standard Version)** ²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."
²⁸Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

FAITH OVER FEAR

Choosing Faith over Fear can be a roller coaster of emotion. Let's start by taking a look at "a day in the life of a Disciple under Jesus", at the range of emotions experienced by the Disciples. To set the stage, in the period leading up to today's Gospel reading from Mark, the Disciples:

Retrieved and buried the body of John the Baptist, who had been beheaded in prison under order from Herod. Then they had to break the devastating news to Jesus.

Just proceeding today's Gospel reading, they witnessed Jesus speaking to and healing the faithful. And when they suggested sending the people into town to get food, Jesus blessed their meager staple of 5 loaves and two fish and told them to feed the 5,000.

Just a couple of typical days in the life of a Disciple following Jesus, right? So, let's get on that roller coaster. Today's Gospel reading begins as Jesus tells the Disciples to get in the boat while he dismissed the crowd – you know the Disciples had to be tired, but feeling a renewed faith over the miracle they had witnessed with the feeding of the 5,000 ... in the presence of Jesus. Meanwhile, Jesus went up the mountain alone... out of the Disciples sight... to pray. As the boat was battered and drifting further out to sea, the Disciples were, understandably, scared. When they saw Jesus walking on the sea, they got even more scared thinking that he was "a ghost". But Jesus assured them that he was in their presence, replacing fear with faith by his words, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Now, at that, Peter's still a little rattled and says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And Jesus said, "Come." At that, Peter took a HUGE leap of faith, stepping

out of the boat onto the water, walking on the water with Jesus – how faith inspiring is that!? But wait... Peter, once again fearing the strong winds, began to sink yelling out, “Lord, save me!” Well, Jesus was right there... present for Peter... and kind of chastised him saying, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Then they stepped up on the boat... Jesus was present among them and the winds suddenly stopped... and their fear went away, their faith was restored, and they exclaimed, “Truly, you are the Son of God!”

I feel like we just took a ride on Top Thrill Dragster at Cedar Point! Reflect on the roller coaster of emotions we feel on a daily basis, particularly in these unprecedented times. In addition to all of our responsibilities and obligations back in the days of “normal” – family, work, school, volunteer activities – we now have the added stress of being even more diligent in looking out for our own and others health and well-being. We don’t know how and if schools will start up, if we can get medical attention when needed, travel plans and recreation activities and sports are cancelled, we watch the news.... It’s not unusual to be anxious and... fearful.

Fear is a legitimate and healthy emotion, one that helps to keep us safe. It keeps us alert to situations and circumstances that may cause us harm – fight or flight. Fear is something we experience. Faith, on the other hand, is something we consciously rise up to – we can’t see it, touch it, or hear it... it just is. And it’s important that we take time to reflect and recognize those things that reinforce our faith, particularly during these times when our emotions lead us often into fear. During the Youth Sunday service a few weeks back, they referenced how one of the Advisors wives – that would be The Sharon – realized how she was experiencing the Lenten season and Easter differently as a Roman Catholic. Gone were the traditional services and rituals of the season, replaced by an on-line experience. Family gatherings and traditions were foregone. All those things to which we have become accustomed to and comfortable with were gone. But instead, she reflected differently on the season – and the spiritual meaning of the season and the events that occurred in the day of Jesus – in a way that reframed and grew her Faith.

“Be not afraid” (or variations such as “fear not”, “do not fear” or “don’t despair”) is by many accounts the most commonly repeated phrase in the Bible. By some accounts, these variations appear 365 times throughout the Bible – one reference for every day, if you need it! From Deuteronomy Chap. 31, v. 8 (ESV), we hear, “It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.” Rise up to faith over fear.

COMPASSION OVER CONFRONTATION

It’s also important to remember that every individual and community has different needs, circumstances and considerations. For that reason, it’s also important that we choose compassion over confrontation.

During the introduction of recently appointed Bishop for the Cleveland Catholic Diocese, Richard Malesic, he noted that in addition to faith, God gave us science. To quote Bishop

Malesic, “Trust God, but do the right thing. We should use the science we have to protect ourselves.”

We will always have conflict in our lives – as individuals and as members of our communities – brought on by different perspectives and experiences. Age, life experience, gender, racial make-up, family background and dynamics, and more all help shape our perspective. And because we have different perspectives, we often find ourselves in conflict over politics, social justice, in today’s age the pandemic response... how the toilet paper should be hung, which way silverware should go in the dishwasher (which, by the way, is one of the most animated conflicts I have been witness to lately).

As humans, we all have Free Will, within acceptable societal standards. We have values, and it’s important to respect those values and beliefs individually and collectively. As Christians we believe in God the Father Almighty; In Jesus Christ, the only Son, our Lord, and; The Holy Spirit. There are others with different guiding beliefs.

The key is in listening, not to appease or to begin formulating our counter argument, but in listening to understand. To listen with compassion over confrontation.

HOPE OVER HATE

Still, there are those who will never be open or sensitive to other perspectives, so it is important that we also actively foster hope over hate.

Our impulse can be to engage that individual, which can lead to escalation and frustration, even broken relationships and hatred. As people of faith, that’s not who we are. As a community of faith, we strive inspire hope, to lift one another up in times of joy and in times of trial.

Where we can, we work to comfort and support one another. We appreciate those “radical acts of kindness” our youth spoke about: Go ahead of me in line, or can I help you carry that to your car? Mow the lawn or prepare a meal or offer to shop for a neighbor who may be shut in or at-risk. Reach out to a friend to connect, or... maybe it’s time to have that difficult conversation with someone. Share some time with someone who is isolated so that they can be alone without being lonely. Come together as we can to worship as Sisters and Brothers in Christ.

I challenge you to hold yourself accountable for sowing hope over hate. Commit to doing one “radical act of kindness” each day and, at the end of each day keep a brief journal of what you did or witnessed of others.

Faith over Fear. Compassion over Confrontation. Hope over Hate. I pray that at least some of these phrases may resonate with you and guide your actions. And I pray for you... Amen