

Getting Out of the Boat

The message today comes in part from the book If You Want to Walk on water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat. The book is written by John Ortberg. I got the idea to read the book from our now retired District Superintendent, Bob Koch. Rev. Koch recommended reading the book while speaking at the 100th Anniversary Celebration of the Clarence United Methodist Church building.

We have often heard the phrase, "we need to be willing to step out of our comfort zone", and the phrase, "we need to think outside of the box." This book is suggesting we go even further, it is suggesting we learn a lesson from Peter, and walk on water. What does it mean to walk on water?

Walking on water means -facing your fears and choosing not to let fear have the last word. Walking on water means -discovering and embracing the unique calling of God on your life. Walking on water means experiencing the power of God in your life to do something you would not be capable of doing on your own.

The Bible is full of examples of men and women who walked on water, men and women who took on a task that could only be accomplished through faith and trust and dependence on God. People like Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his own son, Moses who led the Israelites out of bondage, Joshua and the destruction of Jerico, Paul and his conversion to Christianity, David as he fought Goliath, Esther saving the Jewish people, to name a few. And of course Peter who actually walked on water.

Let's take a closer look at Peter and this scripture to learn how we too might walk on water. Beginning with verse 26, "When the disciples saw him (Jesus) walking on the water they were terrified. "It's a ghost!" they said, and screamed with fear. Jesus spoke to them at once. "Courage," he said. "It is I. Don't be afraid!" Then Peter spoke up, "Lord," he said, "if it is really you, order me to come out on the water to you." Notice how Peter immediately recognized and accepted that it was indeed Jesus calling out to the disciples in the boat. Peter didn't pause to ask questions, what are you doing out in the storm? It's the middle of the night, why aren't you sleeping? How is it you are able to walk on

water? Peter recognized that God was present. We need to be alert to God calling out to us, to God's presence—regardless of the time of day, the place, or the circumstances.

Let's look again, at verse 28, Then Peter spoke up, "Lord," he said, "if it is really you, order me to come out on the water to you." Notice how Peter uses the words "order me to come out on the water to you." Peter doesn't just jump into the water. He doesn't take a foolish risk. He waits for the command. He waits to see if God thinks it's a good idea. In verse 29 Jesus gives the command, "Come!" answered Jesus. So Peter got out of the boat and started walking on the water to Jesus. Peter shows not just courage, but courage accompanied by wisdom and discernment. First Peter recognized the presence of God, and secondly he sought the will of God. When the command is given to, "Come!" Peter obediently gets out of the boat.

Imagine yourself out in a boat, in the dark of night. The wind is blowing and waves are tossing the boat to and fro. John 6 verses 18 and 19 add, "By now a strong wind was blowing and stirring up the water. The disciples had rowed about three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the water, coming near the boat, and they were terrified." Even under the best of circumstances when the sun is shining and the water is calm it would be difficult to walk on water. Imagine trying to do it when the waves are crashing, the wind is at gale force, it's three o'clock in the morning—and you're terrified.

Put yourself in Peter's place. You recognize the Lord is passing by. And you recognize the Lord is offering an adventure of a life time. But at the same time, you're scared to death. What would you choose—the water or the boat? The boat is safe, secure and comfortable. The water is rough. The waves are high. The wind is strong. If you get out of the boat, whatever your boat may happen to be, there's a good chance you might sink.

But here's the catch. If you don't get out of the boat, there's a guaranteed certainty that you will never walk on water. If you want to walk on water, you've got to get out of the boat.

I understand the dilemma. I love to water ski. I love the first pull of the boat that gets me up and zipping across the top of the water. I love the feel of the wind whipping against my face, I love to relax and just glide across the water, I love the occasional waves that challenge me to ride out the bumps and hang on. I love the letting go of the rope and slowly sinking back into the water. I love everything about water skiing.

But I can tell you I absolutely hate jumping out of the boat and into the water. I procrastinate. I make everyone else in the boat ski first. I hem and ha. My ski gloves have to be just right, my jacket has to be just right. I have to sit on the side of the boat and look around. I have to stick a toe in first. Usually, it's not until one of the kids says, "Do you need a push?" that I finally take that jump into the water. I know if I want to ski, I have to get out of the boat. There's no getting around it. But that reluctance to leave the security of the boat hits me every time.

Going water skiing is a literal example of getting out of the boat. But every individual has their own boat. Your boat is whatever represents safety and security to you apart from God himself. Your boat is whatever you are tempted to put your trust in, especially when life gets a little stormy. Your boat is whatever keeps you so comfortable that you don't want to give it up even if it's keeping you from joining Jesus on the waves. Your boat is whatever pulls you away from the high adventure of extreme discipleship. Your boat may be your job, or vocation. It may be a relationship. It may be a secret about yourself that you are keeping from others.

Perhaps your boat is success. That was the case for the rich young ruler in the Bible. Jesus asked him to get out of the boat ("sell all that you have, give the money to the poor, and come and follow me"), but the ruler decided not to. He couldn't give up the big, beautiful boat.

Your boat is any area in your life that is keeping you from fully and courageously trusting God. Fear will tell you what your boat is. Ask yourself this: What is it that most produces fear in me—especially when I think of leaving it behind and stepping out in faith? Before you can walk on water you've got to

recognize and acknowledge your boat, or fear. Then you have got to trust God enough to say, "With God's help I can do this." And lastly, you have got to be courageous enough to throw a leg over the side of the boat and take your first step.

Stepping out of the boat opens your life up to new adventures, new possibilities, a new outlook on life, a new faith and trust in God. It's a risk worth taking. There is danger in getting out of the boat. But there is danger in staying in it as well. If you live in the boat—whatever your boat happens to be—you will eventually die of boredom and stagnation and a sense of loss. All of life is about making choices. All of life involves risk.

Now we come to the part of the story you may not like very much. Let's look at verse 30. "When he (Peter) noticed the wind, however, he was afraid, and started to sink down in the water. "Save me, Lord!" he cried. Peter gathers up his courage, asks permission to go overboard, begins the walk, but upon seeing the wind he is afraid all over again. Will this be the last time Peter will ever experience fear? No, absolutely not, because fear and growth go together like macaroni and cheese. The decision to grow always involves a choice between risk and comfort.

If we are going to follow Jesus, if we are going to help others come to know Christ we are going to have to face the constant recurrence of fear. We've got to be willing to get out of the boat a little every day. We've got to decide are we going to take the chance as Peter did, or are we going to sit in the boat like the other 11 disciples?

I think you'll find that each time you get out of the boat, or face your uncertainties and fears, you'll become a little more likely to get out the next time. If you get out of your boat often enough, it will soon become habit. I noticed a quote in the Macon Chronicle Herald by Pablo Picasso a 20th century artist. It reads, "I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order that I may learn how to do it." It became habit for Picasso to get out of the boat. Likewise, every time you resist God's voice, every time you choose to stay in your boat rather than heed God's call, it gets easier to settle for less than we could be.

Was Peter a failure because he took his eyes off Jesus and let his doubts overcome him? Was Peter a failure because he began to sink? I think not. Peter knew the glory of walking on water, even if only a few steps. Peter knew the joy of totally relying on Jesus to do what he couldn't do alone. I'm sure Peter never forgot the exhilaration of stepping out onto the water, the continued euphoria of being lifted and carried by Jesus, the personal connection he had shared with Jesus.

I think the greater loss, the greater failure was in the eleven other disciples who failed to recognize Jesus, who failed to follow Jesus command to "come", who failed to get out of the boat. They failed quietly and privately. The worst failure is not to sink in the waves. The worst failure is to never get out of the boat, to never follow God's calling out to us.

Peter's experience doesn't end with sinking in the water. Look at verse 31, "Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. 'You of little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?'" Jesus is there to immediately pull Peter from the water. Peter was never alone. He was never without a helper. All he had to do was call out for help, and Jesus was there to offer comfort, strength and support. We too, are never alone. Jesus is there to offer us the same comfort, strength and support.

Jesus also helps Peter to see why he sank, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" The problem is rather clear: whether Peter sank or walked on water depended on whether he focused on the storm or on Jesus. Peter sank because he took his focus off Jesus. Peter sank because he didn't have enough faith in Jesus to help him. But through the experience, Peter's faith grows. It was Peter's willingness to risk failure that helped him to grow.

Jesus is still looking for people who will get out of the boat, for people who will put their trust in Him, for people who are willing to risk all to follow Him. Are you willing to take the risk? Think about what you have to gain. Getting out of the boat, acting on god's calling out to you, is the only way to real growth. It's the way true faith develops. It is the alternative to boredom and stagnation. It is part of discovering and obeying god's will for you. But the most important reason for

getting out of the boat is that the water is where you'll find Jesus. Jesus was not in the boat. He was out on the water. The main reason Peter got out of the boat is that he wanted to be where Jesus was. Remember Peter's request, "Lord if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

What has God been calling you to do? Where do you sense God at work? What's holding you back from joining Him? I hope you'll decide today, to get out of your boat and join Jesus on the water. May Peter's example of faith be a motivator for each one of us. Amen and Amen