

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“FAITH IN GOD IS LIKE LOVE IN MARRIAGE”
Matthew 14:22-33
Romans 9:1-5
August 10, 2008
10:00 A.M. SERVICE**

As the people of God, we are as vulnerable to pain and loss as anyone else in this troubled world. Faith in God carries no guarantees that God will intervene in precisely the way we want.

Faith in God is like love in marriage. Ideally, both are present for better or worse, in good times or in bad. A marriage that cannot deal with disappointment is doomed to failure. A faith commitment that cannot accept defeat is sure to falter. Genuine faith endures whether God seems to be holding us up or letting us down.

Fear is the most paralyzing of our emotions. It may cause us to freeze up physically in a moment of panic, or it may immobilize us psychologically over a long period of time. Once in *The New Yorker* there was a cartoon showing a man, obviously a derelict, standing at a street corner. He is watching a sleek, chauffeur-driven limousine pass by. At ease in the back seat is a prosperous, well-dressed man reading a newspaper. The down-and-out man says, “**Ah, there but for me go I.**” In one way or another, fear exercises its power to incapacitate us.

When reading today’s passage from Matthew’s Gospel some of us may struggle with the claim that Jesus walked on the water. The suggestion has been made that Jesus was actually walking along the shore very near the sea and, because of the storm, it *appeared* that he was walking on the water. But Matthew’s clear intention is to describe a cluster of miracles: Jesus’ walking on the water, Peter’s walking on the water and Jesus’ calming of the

storm. We may believe or disbelieve the story, but Matthew's intention is obvious. All throughout the history of the church we have come to believe that Christ comes to us in the midst of our storms of life to deliver us. That's what we believe this story means.

Peter, in somewhat typical fashion, becomes the embodiment of both faith and fear. The disciples at first were terrified, thinking they were seeing a ghost. When Jesus identified himself, however, Peter was inspired to ask Jesus to let him also walk on the water. Peter did alright at first, but when he saw the wind he was frightened and began to sink. "*Lord, save me!*" he cried. Jesus rescued him, but with a rebuke, "*O man of little faith, why did you doubt?*" They got in the boat and the storm subsided. On the one hand, we have another example of Peter's ambiguity and ambivalence. One moment he is full of faith and the next moment he is overwhelmed with fear. Peter is so much like us in his inconsistencies that we should be encouraged! On the other hand, Peter's experience with Jesus illustrates that our redemption involves both gift and demand. Christ reveals both law and grace simultaneously.

Fear is a universal human experience, yet when it is *my* fear it is so intensely personal and so threatening to my very life that it seems unique. Fear creates confusion and uncertainty. It exhausts us with its great weight. It distracts us from even the most important tasks and from thinking about the future. Fear breeds fear, and, unrelieved, threatens our sense of reality.

Leo Tolstoy, in his autobiographical *My Confession*, told of an experience in mid-life that threatened his very being. **"I felt the ground on which I stood was crumbling, that there was nothing for me to stand on, that what I had been living for was nothing, that I had no reason for living. . . . Life was meaningless. With all my force I struggled away from life, the idea of suicide came as naturally to me as formerly that of bettering my life. . . . Here was I, a man fortunately situated, hiding away a cord, to avoid being tempted to hang myself by it to the transom between the closets of my room, where I undressed alone every evening; and I ceased to go hunting with a gun because it offered too easy a way of getting rid of life. I knew not what I wanted; I was afraid of life . . ."** Such an experience, which some call "**the dark night of the soul**," has come to some of the most prominent figures in human history. It has invariably been both life-threatening and life-changing. Living through such a dark and menacing period requires coming to some kind of faith. Only by

arriving at a transcendent perspective can a person move beyond this grave and deplorable condition. Fear ultimately requires faith.

Now there is a difference that we must distinguish between fear and anxiety. Fear, as such, is a natural and normal human emotion. Fear protects us from all kinds and degrees of danger. Normal fear has a specific object. We know what we're afraid of. Anxiety is sometimes simply a heightened state of fear, fear elevated to a more intense and more diffused level. Anxiety may not have a specific object, but may involve more pervasive, less focused feelings. Anxiety is sometimes a symptom of depression, or some other illness, and often merits a professional medical evaluation.

Faith *per se*, generic faith, may not be the answer to fear, and may even be counter-productive. Faith that winning the lottery will solve my financial problems is foolishness, as are many other kinds of so-called faith. Even faith in God does not remove our personal responsibility. **“God helps those who help themselves”** may be heard as a cynical adage or as a biblical truth. In Romans 9, the apostle Paul is deeply troubled by the fact that so many of his fellow Jews have rejected Jesus. He considers possible reasons for this and speculates on what it might ultimately mean, but at the end of his own wisdom he trusts in God. He has faith that ultimately God will see to the full redemption of Israel, whatever that might mean, however it might occur.

Faith in God is primarily trusting in God's presence. God is with us, and within us, whatever happens. Such faith produces confidence and courage as we deal with fear. Faith in God is trusting in God's love. Nothing in the whole cosmos, says Paul, can separate us from the love of God. **(Rm 8:35-39) “Perfect (or mature) love casts out fear,”** says **1 John. (4:18)** Faith in God is trusting in God's power. We do not trust in God's power to give us whatever we want. We trust in God's power to accomplish the purposes implied in creation, the purposes revealed in Jesus Christ, and the purposes being worked out in human history. Faith in God's presence, God's love, and God's power is faith unafraid.

Jesus said, ***“Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”*** (Lk 12:32)

Faith would not be faith if God granted every wish and solved every problem. Faith means relying on God even when we do not understand

God's ways. Faith means trusting in God even when God seems to let us down. The Danish theologian Kierkegaard said, "**Faith is like treading water over 70,000 fathoms.**" Faith holds us up even when there is no solid ground in sight.

Even when you feel like your prayers are not being answered; when you are in the lion's den, and the lions are hungry, hold on to your faith. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.