

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
TAKE COURAGE! IT IS I, DON'T BE AFRAID
MATTHEW 14:22-33
August 7, 2011
10:00 A.M. SERVICE**

Fear can cause people to do some really outrageous things. Historians tell us that King Charles VIII of France, who ascended to the throne in 1483, became paranoid with the thought that someone was trying to poison his food. As a result, he began eating less and less. Tragically, the less he ate, the more suspicious he became. He finally died in 1498--not from poisoning, but from malnutrition. (1) Fear had done him in.

Many years ago, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale told of a young woman who was destroyed by her fears. At the time, this woman was a world-class tennis star. However, as a small girl thirty years before, she had watched in terror as her mother died suddenly of a heart attack while being treated by a dentist. The traumatic experience so profoundly affected this young woman that in the thirty years that followed, she absolutely refused any dental treatment. The mere suggestion of going to a dentist terrified her. And this despite her realization that the dentist to whom her mother had gone had no responsibility for her mother's death. It was just a coincidence that the heart attack which caused her death occurred at the dentist's office.

But finally dental work became so necessary that the woman was compelled to have it done in spite of her terror. She insisted, however, that her physician accompany her to the dentist's office. But it was to no avail. As she sat in the dentist's chair, just like her mother had thirty years before, she was suddenly seized by a heart attack and died.

The London newspaper which reported the story headlined it with the words **"Killed by thirty years of thought!"** (2)

Fear is a powerful force in our lives.

Lee Iacocca, the former head of Chrysler Corporation asks in a recent book why the SUV has been such a success. What is its purpose? Very few people go off road, so it's not because they need a rugged all terrain vehicle. The SUV doesn't have the passenger or storage capacity of a minivan, or the good ride and handling of a car. So, what is the motivation for buying an SUV? Why are people lugging around all that extra weight? Bigger engines (usually V8s) are not known for fuel economy and low emissions.

Iacocca attributes it to fear. He writes, **“I think the SUV feeds a strong desire for security and control on the road. In this day and age, people want to put as much steel and iron around them as they can. They equate weight with safety. It's a factor, but in no way compares to solid structural design and the use of multiple air bags . . . With thousands of other SUVs speeding past them, not to mention eighteen wheelers and cement mixers, drivers just feel more secure. It's a perception and Detroit promoted it. One SUV brand advertised itself with the headline, “Look upon it as a 4,000 pound security blanket . . .” Iacocca adds, “If you want guaranteed safety on the road, why not drive a tank!”** (3)

Well, that's not a pastoral recommendation.

The Sunday supplement magazine, USA Weekend, ran a cover story sometime back that you may have seen. It was titled **“Fear: What Americans Are Afraid of Today.”** In a scientific poll, the magazine uncovered the things Americans fear most:

54% are “afraid” or “very afraid” of being in a car crash.

53% are “afraid” or “very afraid” of having cancer.

50% are “afraid” or “very afraid” of inadequate Social Security.

49% are “afraid” or “very afraid” of not having enough money for retirement.

35% are “afraid” or “very afraid” of getting Alzheimer's.

33% are “afraid” or “very afraid” of being a victim of individual violence.

32% are “afraid” or “very afraid” of being unable to pay current debts. (4)

Fear is a powerful force in our lives, particularly as we continue to struggle to overcome a steep economic downturn, and as many of us struggle with the difficulties of aging. That is why today's lesson from Matthew's Gospel is so important to us.

In an earlier chapter from Matthew's gospel, Jesus fed five thousand men, and their wives and children, with just five small loaves of bread and two fish. Now the Master needed some time alone. He sent the crowds home and the disciples out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee while he went to a mountain to pray.

The Sea of Galilee is a large body of water, eight miles wide by thirteen miles long. Of the twelve disciples, four; Peter, Andrew, James and John were all fishermen. They knew these waters very well. They knew that, at this time of year, the Sea of Galilee was subject to strong gusts of wind. According to most commentaries, the late afternoon and evening was not a good time to be out in the middle of the lake. Perhaps that is why Matthew tells us that Jesus "*made the disciples*" get into the boat. Is it possible that the four seasoned fishermen could already tell that a storm was brewing?

The boat was a considerable distance from land and was being buffeted by the waves, according Matthew, because the wind was against it. And shortly before dawn Jesus went out to the boat, walking on the lake. It is difficult enough for us to imagine someone walking on a sea when it is calm, but try to imagine someone walking on the water when the wind is whipping the surface and large waves are forming. The disciples were already uneasy in the storm. Now when they saw Jesus walking on the lake, they were terrified. "*It's a ghost,*" they cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "*Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.*" **And that is Christ's word for us today.** "*Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid.*" In the face of difficult economic times, in the face of declining health, in the face of concern about a loved one dealing with illness or a teenager dealing with an assortment of issues, don't be afraid. Christ will be with us in our troubled times when life's storms threaten us and we are afraid for our lives and our futures.

Take the case of Jaycee Dugard; for 18 years, Phillip Garrido kept Jaycee Dugard prisoner in his backyard. He and his wife perpetrated a crime that he himself described as disgusting. Eighteen years ago, they kidnapped 11-year-old Jaycee Lee Dugard as she walked to a school bus stop in a quiet neighborhood in California.

They kept her imprisoned in a dismal backyard compound of tents and sheds, where she was held in isolation. She had two daughters by her captor; the youngest is 11, the same age she was when she was abducted. It's a case that will puzzle us for years to come. But how did she survive for 18 years? Faith!!

The worst thing we can do in a storm is to let go of our faith. That's the most important thing we need to see. If we let go of our faith, we will surely sink. Jaycee Dugard held on to her faith until she found Christ's hand reaching out to her. She knew then that she could make it through any storm.

The worst thing we can do in the midst of a storm is to lose our faith, to look down at the waves, to lose our confidence in our Master. We need to keep our eyes upon Jesus. We need to see his hand extended to us, reaching out to catch us just as it was extended to Simon Peter. Sometimes that hand is extended through our church family and other Christian friends.

The point is, Christ is able to deliver us from the storm. As Paul wrote in *Ephesians 3:20-21*: ***“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!”***

Hear these words again...the words of Christ, ***“Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid.”*** Christ is able to deliver us from the storm. Trust him. Believe in him. See him reach out to you to lift you from the angry waves. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. No one has the right to cheat you out of living an abundant life. Death will come to all of us; so in the meantime, live, live, live. Take courage because I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.

1. Leland Gregory, *Stupid History: Tales of Stupidity, Strangeness, and Mythconceptions Throughout the Ages* (Kansas City: Andrews

McMeel Publishing, LLC, 2007), p. 113.

2. Norman Vincent Peale, *Enthusiasm Makes The Difference* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1967), p. 60.

3. Lee Iacocca With Catherine Whitney, *Where Have All the Leaders Gone?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc, 2007), pp. 176-177.