

“Call and Response”

James 2:14-17; Matthew 14:22-33

5-15-11

There's a movie that I rather enjoy called “Waking Life.” At one point, four young men are walking down a city street having an impassioned discussion about altering the very fabric of society: revolution. “On the way to discovering what we love, we will find everything we hate, everything that blocks our path to what we desire... [We'll] confront the familiar... live as if something actually depended on [our] actions.... To demonstrate the contrast between what life presently is and what it could be. To immerse ourselves in the oblivion of actions and know we're making it happen... to exchange love and hate, life and death, terror and redemption, repulsions and attractions... a total denial of every kind of restraint and limitation.”

These are powerful, heady words. Speaking and speaking and speaking about the importance of living out your values, embracing a better future, believing in yourself as an agent of change, confronting that which is unholy or unjust in society. As they continue to call for revolution and freedom, they come upon a very old man with a long white beard wearing a hardhat who has climbed to the top of a telephone pole. He clings to it, calmly and blankly. One of the young men asks, “Hey, old man, what are you doing up there?” “I'm not sure,” he responds. “You need any help getting down, sir?” He looks around for a moment and says, “No, I don't think so.” Under his breath, one of the young men mutters, “idiot.” Another young man replies, “He's no worse than us. He's all action and no theory. We're all theory and no actions.”

There's an interesting thing about theory and discussion: while on the one hand, you certainly don't want to move without thinking, on the other hand, endlessly discussing theory can lead to inaction – just a lot of talk. It's easy to get bogged down in theory because it's perfectly

safe. Surrounding ourselves with like-minded friends, ranting and raving about society - everyone's a critic and each of us is susceptible to gripe-fests. To actually nail down a belief is hard. To back that belief up with action? That's something that can terrify us. How do we know which action is the right one?

As Christians, we are not immune to this. We think, read, debate, study, question, pray, but we frequently end up just as lost as when we started. Where is the Spirit leading us? How can we find out? Good Christians that we are, we go to scripture for guidance. We look to stories of people in the Bible and wonder – well, which one am I like? Which is my path?

We know that scripture issues a call to all of us, made over and over, expressed in countless ways. It is the same call and the same Lord who is calling. With that in mind, let's look at our gospel lesson. And we find our friend Peter. G-d love him: he may be the first one to miss the boat and put his foot in his mouth, but he always comes back proclaiming Christ.

The lesson happens right after Jesus feeds the five thousand. He sends the disciples on ahead of him in the boat while he stays behind to dismiss the crowds and to pray alone, but by the time he is done praying, a strong wind has picked up and rough waves have steered the boat far away on the sea. The text tells us that the miraculous feast happened around 6:00 at night, when the first watch started. Jesus didn't come back to the boat to catch up with the disciples again until the fourth watch of the night, which would have been between 3 and 6 am.

You can imagine how uneasy the disciples must have felt being caught up in a horrifying storm, beaten about by the current, all alone and wondering how on earth they were going to find Jesus again once they found the shore; and with that storm, you can bet they didn't get much sleep. Then, on top of all that, they see this figure coming toward them on the ocean. They're convinced that they've seen a ghost. They are terrified and screaming - screaming. This is no

time for a measured response – what they witnessed was impossible. People can't walk on water. Right away, Jesus reassures them. "Take heart. It is I; do not be afraid."

The only response I could imagine having, if I were there on the boat, would be wide-eyed, stunned silence – shock – disbelief; not our friend Peter, though. The storm is still raging, the disciples are looking at their Lord and friend standing *on* water and Peter bursts out, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Who in their right mind would say such a thing?! I can just see the other disciples trying to make sense of the situation. They literally cannot believe what they're seeing. This must be a dream or a hallucination. Surely it's not real. Then, startled by Peter's outburst, they turn toward him thinking, "Dude, be quiet! What is wrong with you?" their eyes rolling (or whatever the ancient world equivalent of rolling your eyes is).

Perhaps, if they were thinking a bit more clearly, they might have wondered, "What do you think you're asking? Maybe this is something our Lord and master can do – not us; not regular people. Jesus can perform miracles, not us. For heaven's sake, Peter, behave yourself!" It must have felt like an eternity passed. Silence resounds. Peter's request hangs in the air – "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you" and Jesus says, simply, "Come."

So Peter steps out of the boat. He leaves the boat. By all rational accounts, that boat is the very thing that is keeping him alive; the only thing keeping him afloat. A choppy sea is treacherous, indeed – a complete and very dangerous unknown. So, it would follow that the boat is the thing to cling to at all costs. Abandoning all reasonable ideas of safety and security, he stepped off the boat, down to the water below. The text tells us that once he left the boat, he actually started walking on the water. He came towards Jesus. We don't know how far he got,

but isn't it incredible that he took any steps at all? Peter had a few brief moments of perfect trust and faith in Christ Jesus.

Sadly for Peter's ego, the story doesn't end there. As long as he kept his eyes on Jesus, he was doing alright, but then – but then he noticed the strong wind. The wind of doubt and uncertainty blew hard, fierce, and fast. Hesitation and distrust overtook him. Despite our best intentions, doubt can be so crippling. Even though Jesus was right there, Peter didn't take heart anymore. He was afraid. Having taken his eyes off Jesus, he started sinking into the sea. He realized, mid-miracle, that what he was doing was impossible; and so, it became impossible. His over-thinking torpedoed his ability to act, to follow his call. Sinking into the sea, Peter cries out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!"

Jesus rescues him right away – he reaches out his hand and catches him. As relieved as Peter was to be saved, Jesus' words to him must have been hard to hear, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" They get back on the boat, the storm ends, and, awestruck, everyone watching worships Jesus as the Son of God. Whereas at first all of the other disciples were shocked into silence, now it is Peter who has nothing to say. Why did I doubt?

Writing about this gospel lesson, Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenges: "Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea...to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learnt the meaning of faith. Before he can believe, the utterly impossible and ethically irresponsible situation on the waves of the sea must be displayed. The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if [we] imagine that [we] can follow Jesus without taking this step, [we] are deluding [ourselves]."¹

¹ (p. 63)

Bonhoeffer then proclaims, “only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient believes.”² For Bonhoeffer, faith and obedience are unified and intimately interconnected. The Letter of James reminds us, what good does it do anyone if you see someone naked and starving and your response is “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill”?’ Theory or none, once we hear Jesus’ call, our, “faith can no longer mean sitting still and waiting – [we] must rise and follow him.”³ James continues: “faith without works is dead.” Without living in Christ and granting him our whole selves, we will never truly obey and we will not grow as Christians. A healthy faith inspires obedience and that obedience, in turn, strengthens our faith. Peter had to take the step off the boat, that leap of faith, to learn obedience and so do we.

I don’t mean to sugar coat anything. Faith is hard; obeying is hard. But we should remember that we are, indeed, sinners. If we wait to be perfect before we follow, we will never even put our big toe over the side of the boat. Please never ever say you *just don’t have faith* or you don’t have enough faith and that’s why you can’t act. Bonhoeffer charges us, “If you believe, take the first step, it leads to Jesus Christ. If you don’t believe, take the first step all the same, for you are bidden to take it. No one wants to know about your faith or unbelief, your orders are to perform the act of obedience on the spot. Then you will find yourself in the situation where faith becomes possible and where faith exists in the true sense of the word.”⁴

We are not called to be all theory and no action. Neither are we called to be all action and no theory. We are a part of the body of Christ universal: a family empowered to spread God’s love in the smallest and largest scales. In your life of faith, I urge you to dream and dream big. Are there limits to God’s power? Are there limits to what God can do through you, through

² (p. 63)

³ (62-63)

⁴ (p. 67)

this church, in the world? No, praise God. Do you feel like something is missing? Is God speaking to you, nudging you towards a new ministry or project or service? Well, speak up! Get involved in this place. Engage your community. Pray long and hard. Ask God to guide your feet, heart, and mind to move closer to G-d's love and purpose for you. No one is too young or too old, too shy or too bold to serve God. There is no action without risk, it is true, but acting for the glory of God, learning to be fearless to honor your creator will surely be a blessing. Please join me in prayer.

God, we are not fearless, our faith is not perfect, and we don't do the right thing all the time. And so we thank you that the Bible is filled with people just like us. We thank you that you love us unconditionally, just as we are, while yet calling us to greater things. You know our pains and our hardships. You know our hesitations and uncertainties. Grant that we may be doers of the word and not just hearers. Grant us the courage to trust in you, to hear your call to us, and to take that first step again and again. God, we believe; truly Christ is Lord of all.

AMEN