

St. Barnabas' Church  
Sermon for 5B Pentecost, Proper 7  
June 23 & 24, 2018  
The Rev. Martha Kirkpatrick

### Jesus in the Boat

1 Sam. 17:1a, 4-11, 32-49; Ps. 9:9-20; 2 Cor. 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

One of the many things about St. Barnabas' that I am grateful for is our diversity of viewpoints. I have found that time and time again it pushes me to avoid hot rhetoric, to go deeper, to find a place of greater understanding, reconciliation, healing and hope, to speak into the spaces that divide. It also can also cause us though to be fearful of saying anything controversial, which is I think a lingering fear of creating divisiveness within a community that has worked hard to heal itself.

But we always have to remember that we are called as Christians to proclaim by word and example the Good News of Jesus Christ, and I am called as a preacher to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ. That does not always look like a place in the middle. Our challenge, and our opportunity, then, becomes how to speak truth with love. If we can do that, we can be an example the world needs.

Because the Good News of Jesus Christ is first and foremost the truth of love. God loves all creation, no exceptions. God commands that we love one another. That love is to be the guiding principle in our lives. We "walk in love, as Christ loves us and gave himself for us." This love is not so much a feeling as it is a stance and action, in the words of our Baptismal Covenant, "to respect the dignity of every human being." Love proclaims and practices (because remember that love is principally a verb) the dignity, the divinity, of every person. There are no exceptions. This our life's work, to grow in love. Hal has a t-shirt (words on clothes seems to be the meme of the week) that reads: "God loves you. I'm still trying." That's ok. It takes work, this loving.

Love is so powerful a force that we have all sorts of ways of denying or diminishing it. We reduce it with sentimentality. We scoff at it and call it weakness. We say that it has no place in the public realm, only the private, with family and friends, which, by the way, has absolutely no warrant in scripture. The realm of God's care is every bit as much with the public, the political, the corporate, as it is with the intimate and personal. And we distort love by claiming its power on the side of our own family, our friends, our tribe, and our nation. We presume to make a claim for the preferential love of God. "God loves us best." This is not the gospel.

The foremost enemy of love is fear. Since the beginning of time, as long as they have existed, despots and oligarchs have been using fear to turn people against each other. It's not coincidence that modern fascist governments have arisen in times of great economic stress. "Your suffering is their fault." The strategy is to convince us to see the other as less than human. Once someone is no longer human we can do whatever we want. It's proven to be stunningly effective over the centuries. This is why scripture says over and over and over again "Do Not Be Afraid!" I need a daily reminder not to succumb to fear.

Today's gospel is a lesson in facing fear. Like the disciples, we are in our fragile little boat, tossed by the storms, not knowing what will happen next. But note that the disciples are not alone on the sea, there are other boats! Notice that Jesus has led the disciples "to go to the other side." This other side is to the gentiles, those outside their faith, their enemies even. Rabbis wouldn't go there. This was not a safe place to go to. And Jesus goes there anyway.

And think about what water means in the Old Testament. Beginning with the first chapter of Genesis, water is chaos. In the great flood in Genesis 6, water is destruction and death. Water is something human beings can't control: water symbolizes that over which we have no power. Even experienced sailors like the disciples have no power over water. Only God can exercise power over water. Think of how God helps Noah to withstand the death force of the flood, how God uses Moses to part the waters of the Red Sea to liberate the Israelites. God's power over water is demonstrated in the story of Jonah, which is remarkably similar to today's Gospel. Jonah, disobeying God and hopping on the first boat to Tarshish, like Jesus is asleep in the hold when a storm comes up. The sailors go down and find him. "What are you doing, Sleeper! Get up, call on your god." When they finally threw Jonah overboard the sea ceased from its raging, and Jonah would be redirected, so as to say, to Nineveh where God had sent him in the first place.

Water in the Old Testament symbolizes chaos, destruction and death, over which only God has power. And our little boat, and all the other little boats, is the human condition. There is sickness, violence, death, fear, people on the move, as our ancestors had been on the move, some fleeing dangerous and violent governments, some forced out of their homes. The human condition, so vividly demonstrated by the cross, is marked by our tendency to transfer our pain on to others, to dehumanize and demean. It is in the midst of this human condition that Jesus chooses to dwell. He abides where the suffering is. The disciples call upon Jesus and the waters calm. This means that not only the little boat with Jesus in it is saved. EVERYONE, including the people in the other boats, experiences the fruits of the peace of Christ. We call upon Jesus and our neighbors experience peace, even without knowing where it comes from. That's how powerful it is.

The peace of Christ is not simply the absence of conflict. And it is certainly not merely the quelling of dissent, which might be nothing more than the force of oppression. There is no true peace without justice. The peace of Christ is the peace that comes from the power of love.

Do not be afraid!

When faced with turmoils, questions, controversies, the storms of our lives and our world, our stance is not decided by whether we are Democrat or Republican, it's not decided by whether we support everything the president does. It is not decided by whether we oppose everything the president does. It is not decided for us by Fox News or CNN.

Our guide, our anchor, our *axis mundi*, our center, is Jesus Christ. We follow Jesus' teachings and Jesus' example. Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me. Jesus is where the suffering is, and calls us to follow him there, in healing, love, and reconciliation.

The Most Rev. Michael Curry, our Presiding Bishop, recently said, “The Christian faith is grounded in the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth ... If it doesn’t look like love, if it doesn’t look like Jesus of Nazareth, it cannot be claimed to be Christian.” He goes on to say, “we are experiencing a fundamental distortion of Christian teaching of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.”

This is the truth we are called to proclaim. However materially well off we may be individually, we are all in our fragile little boats. But we know that Jesus is right there with us, calling us into the hurting places, to be bearers of healing, hope, and love. Because only the power of love will save us. Amen.