

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
August 13, 2017
Matthew 14:22-33

“You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Jesus asks Peter when he falters walking on the water towards Jesus. But not in a shaming way. Not in a punitive way, because Jesus immediately reaches out to pull Peter to safety when he panics. But more as a question to lean into. What do we need from Jesus? What is it? Hasn’t he given us everything we need?

Today’s gospel reading takes us to the heart of the matter. Why do we doubt? Why does our faith grow and wane? What are we lacking?

After all, unlike Peter, we stand on the side of history where we know pretty much the whole story. We know who this Jesus was and is. We know he died and was resurrected, we know that he has promised us new life with him, we have been given the Holy Spirit, and we have Scripture to refer to whenever we want.

But faith isn't something we can pin down in our heads. Faith is a living response to what we believe. And this is where it gets tricky. Staying grounded in our faith takes practice.

The person who prays, "Lord, I haven't criticized anyone. I haven't gossiped about anyone. Lord, I haven't hoarded. I haven't ignored anyone. I'm doing pretty well. But Lord, I'm about to get up from bed now and I'm going to need your help from here on in."

In our heads, we often have it figured out. We're inspired by scripture and the lives of the saints. We determined to carry our cross without complaining; we're going to trust that what experiences we're given in a day we'll receive as gift; we're going to trust and not worry about our grown children or our grandchildren.

And then the day begins and we bump into people and events that challenge us. We forget our intentions. We begin to react. We judge our neighbours. We resent or blame others. We lose sight that everything is practice. Everything is spiritual. Everyone is a child of God. And life is holy.

Walking the Camino is practice in building faith. Every day you wake up and start walking, not knowing where the next place to eat

is, what challenges will come, where you can find a place to sleep. Each day is an opportunity to rest into faith and say, “I trust that everything I need will be provided. The sustenance, the lessons to help me grow, the people to support me.”

And the struggle is to keep conscious. To keep awake. To welcome what shows up on the path. Prayer seems to be the best way of practising and developing the muscles of staying awake and aware, and, developing the ability to see God’s hand in everything.

On the third day of our pilgrimage, Jim and I learned about an evening mass at a local church where pilgrims could receive a special blessing. We went. And we’re greeted at the door. “Are you pilgrims?” a woman asked. I guess it was obvious. We were taken up to a special pilgrims’ section opposite the choir. The church was full. We were the only pilgrims. The only people in our section of the church. At the end of the mass, the woman motioned for us to go to the altar rail. There the priest blessed us in Portuguese. What he said set the congregation off laughing. Later we learned that he told the people that we would need an extra special blessing because we were so old to be undertaking such a challenge.

We all need the support of others. There have been people in this parish community who have confided in me that their faith is weak; that a difficult turn of events has shaken their faith. My response has been, "That's why we're in community. We need each to pray for each other and to hold each other up when our faith is weak." And often, our sense of a weakened faith is really a letting go of an out-dated way of relating to God and Jesus to make room for a new and deeper connection.

Our nephew also walked the Camino; the longer one through France and Spain. He was visiting with us these past two nights and when we were comparing notes about our Caminos, he told us that it was the first time in his life he experienced life without preplanning, anticipating and organizing it. He tries to capture and maintain that way of being, but it's hard when you have a busy life.

It's interesting to note in our reading today what happens when Peter panics, starts to sink and calls out to Jesus. Jesus doesn't hesitate. He pulls Peter up out of the water. I imagine Jesus would have enjoyed seeing Peter hold onto the love and faith that drew him to want to walk towards Jesus. But, like a parent, who walks beside

their child as they master balancing on a garden wall, Jesus is ready to catch Peter as he steps out. The scripture reads, “Jesus immediately reached out his hand....” What reassurance!

And maybe we need these moments of intense doubt that make us realize our complete and utter vulnerability. Too often we rely on our own devices to create a sense of security not realizing how ultimately futile they are.

On my commute up here last week, I heard a very interesting story on the CBC series called ‘The Disruptors.’ A young woman described an event that changed her life. Eating dinner with friends in a popular and very busy Toronto restaurant, suddenly she received a blow to the head that made her see stars. She thought someone had thrown a brick through the window at her. (Isn’t it amazing how quickly our brains come up with bizarre explanations for what we experience?!) Instead, a bus boy had lost his balance and dropped a stack of dishes on her head. She suffered a severe concussion that changed the course of her life. In the course of recovering from the concussion which involved days in a darkened room without screen time, she fell into a deep depression and became suicidal. Fast

forward. She has had to change her career trajectory for something less stressful. She works daily on her mental health. Sounds like a sad tale, doesn't it?

But this young woman told a different story. She shared that as a result of this accident she appreciates her life so much more, she has increased empathy for others, and knows and spends time on what and whom she values.

Not once did she mention faith, but for me, she expressed it. She was living it. Trusting that life is good. That all things work onto good. And that life itself is a blessing. And someone or something holds her, and the world.

Jesus reassures us when life is stormy, "Take heart: it is I; do not be afraid." And if we find the courage to walk out into the unknown, he will support us. But only when needed. We take the first steps. We venture out.

What's the expression? Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Our faith does not grow through reason or thought. Our faith grows through experience. Looking back on each day and seeing how our

needs were met; noticing how all the ways in which we were encouraged, inspired, supported, directed.

On the Camino it was amazing how many “angels” appeared during the course of our walking. We would hear someone hissing and we’d turn to look and see someone shaking their head to indicate we had made a wrong turn and then they’d point us in the right direction. In casual conversation over a morning coffee, a fellow pilgrim would mention something seemingly innocuous that would turn out to be an invaluable tip at a later date. We would “guess” which direction to go and arrive exactly where we needed to be a few minutes later.

What more do we need? What other “evidence”?

“You of little faith, why do you doubt?”

Developing our faith is both work and grace. We live into our faith by reflecting on the grace in our lives; as Jesus models for us, we take time to pray and allow the Spirit increasingly more room in our lives and heart.

I don’t believe Jesus’ question, “Why do you doubt,” is an accusation. Rather it is a challenge to fully into the lives we’ve been

given. With trust and courage. And with the growing awareness that we're never alone; we have been befriended by the One who comes to us in the bread and wine we are about to receive; the One who is there when we step out in faith.

Amen.