

**Trust and Transformation in Times of Change Series: Taking Heart**  
**Sermon – First United Church of Christ – 9.15.19**  
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**Matthew 14:22-33**

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" *Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him*, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

**Sermon**

Today we close out our sermon series on Trust and Transformation in Times of Change. Over the past couple of weeks, we've talked about how changes happen, whether we choose them or not, personally, professionally, and yes, at church. We have experienced a lot of changes on our staff, and change doesn't happen without grief accompanying it. It is *vulnerable*. Which is why it is so important to talk about our experiences together. This is the time when we *recognize* those changes, and *hold* them along with the *loss* that *accompanies* them as a congregation, and move through them together, trusting that God's Spirit *is with* us, leading us, transforming us along the way. That is what this series has been about.

As part of this sermon series, we have been engaging with Lori Gottlieb's book, *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone: A Therapist, Her Therapist and Our Lives Revealed*. As many of you know, Pastor Todd and I realized that both of our spouses were reading this book independently, at the same time, and were recommending it to each of us. We felt we couldn't not read it as we began this series.

In the book, therapist Lori Gottlieb describes facing an uncertain health diagnosis that doctors can't quite figure out. She worries about its severity, if it will shorten her life, and like any parent would, she worries about leaving her son without a mother. Her therapist Wendell, tells her that she has two choices: she can give her son "a mother who's constantly worried about leaving him motherless, or [she says,] I could give him a mother whose uncertain health makes her more acutely aware of the preciousness of their time together."<sup>1</sup> Wendell tells her, "The more vulnerable you are, the more courageous you'll feel." The more vulnerable you are, the more courageous you'll feel.

We have change and vulnerability today in our scripture, too. (Thank you, Matt, for bringing it to life for us!) A story of change and loss, though maybe that isn't initially clear. You

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<sup>1</sup> Lori Gottlieb, *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone*, 370-1.

see, we come on the scene in the *evening* when Jesus is sending his disciples on a boat. What we don't see is that Jesus and his friends have just had an enormously eventful day.

The day begins like this: Jesus learned that John the Baptist, has been murdered by King Herod. And Jesus grieves the loss of his cousin, his mentor, his friend, by going away to a deserted place, to the *midbar*, in Hebrew which can mean wilderness, but here might better be translated as the place away from words. (Mi- "away from," and *dabar*, "to speak a word").<sup>2</sup> Jesus goes to be by himself because there are no words, only deep sighs, as he grieves losing John.

But he's not alone for long, because crowds of people follow him. You see, they have needs too—they're sick, sad, hungry, and more. And in the midst of his grief, the miraculous occurs: Jesus, grieved himself, has compassion for them. The scripture tells us Jesus *feels with* them in his gut. And out of that compassion, is moved to heal them.<sup>3</sup>

After Jesus has healed the crowds, that day, the disciples notice that it's getting late and stomachs are growling. They (logically) suggest that it is time to send crowds away so they can get something to eat nearby. To which Jesus responds, "they needn't go away, you give them something to eat." And thus begins the feeding of the 5,000 (which was more like 15,000, because they didn't count women and children).

Like I said, it had been a *big* day, and *we* meet Jesus and the disciples *that evening*. Jesus sends the disciples away in a boat, dismisses the last of the crowds, and *again*, goes up a mountain alone, to pray. I wonder what we can observe, here, about how Jesus moves through his life. I notice that Jesus seems to be aware that in order to give, he must balance his giving with time for grief, prayer, peace, time for his mind to wander. In order to meet people where *they* are, he needs to be kind to *himself*, too. He must practice "gentleness and patience with all that is unsolved in *his* heart"<sup>4</sup> by taking some time to heal.

The next scene cuts to the disciples, hours later, in the boat, battered by unruly waves. These storms were frequent on the sea of Galilee—they'd seemingly come up from nowhere and just as soon, dissipate. But the waves and wind might also be an intentional plot device—the sea was a symbolic of chaos, of the unknown. As something not to be trusted. That sounds a lot like *change* to me – chaotic, unknown, not to be trusted. And when the disciples seem to have had just about enough of the wind and the waves battering their boat, Jesus comes to them, walking on water.

Jesus' actions in this story tell us a lot: first, he travels out to the disciples' boat *in the* chaos, sees that they're frightened and immediately says, "take heart, its me." "Take heart," he says, to the disciples in the boat, which can also be translated as "courage," because it comes from the (Latin) root word *cor*, meaning heart. Take heart. Be of good courage in the face of change, fear, and the unknown.

But right after Jesus says, "Take heart," the disciples are still confused. So Peter challenges Jesus, saying, if its you, call me out to walk on the water too. Jesus invites him. Could it be that the most important theme arising here is that God in Jesus is *with* the disciples *right*

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew*, Proper 13(18) Matthew 14:13-21, "Inter-Text: The World We Think We Live In," 191-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>4</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, my emphasis

*where they are?* Indeed, I think its possible that one of the most important themes throughout the entire Bible is the theme of God being *with*.<sup>5</sup> God's abiding presence, God *with* us.

Yes, its cool and symbolic that Jesus, a representation of God with us, can walk upon and even control "the chaos" that the sea represented. But Jesus also comes to the disciples as a grieving person—a sign of solidarity with people's experiences and feelings. Even Jesus isn't immune to change and vulnerability. Based on Jesus' words and actions for the disciples, the perhaps the real miracle isn't walking on water. Its that Jesus comes to be *with* them despite all odds. Again, its a miracle of compassion.

Now Peter's actions seem pretty risky. Unnecessarily vulnerable. But don't we all long to be those who walk on chaos and not be consumed by it? So Peter gets out of the boat. "The more vulnerable you are, the more courageous you'll feel." Or as artist Jan Richardson puts it, the fact that Peter was willing to get out of the boat, shows that he did take heart—that he would "risk walking on water, *sinking* on water, to follow "the voice/that calls us,/the love/that catches us,/the faith/that carries us/beyond the wind,/the wave." So Peter walks on water but then he starts sinking, and cries out to Jesus to save him. Immediately, Jesus reaches out and takes hold of Peter's arm. Again, we have the miracle of "with-ness," of abiding compassionate presence from Jesus.

Trust and courage, taking heart in the presence of change, is not easy. It is vulnerable. But that's what Jesus gives his disciples as he comes to meet them in their wind-battered boat on chaotic waters. Perhaps Jesus' words can comfort us, too. And maybe what Jesus' actions can teach us is that *we don't have to be* as brash as Peter, stepping out onto the chaotic waters. But wherever we are, we can trust that when we reach out or cry out to God in times of change and transition, we can trust that God is *with us*, and that we can abide with one another through grief, change, and vulnerability.

And if you've ever gone canoeing down a river, perhaps you know that rocks will get in your way. They disrupt your trip, they cause you to have to change directions, and sometimes they downright tip you over. Canoe guides will tell you that when you've hit a rock, the human tendency is to lean away from the rock. To avoid it. Which is a perfect recipe to tipping over. Instead, they say, that when you hit a rock, you have to lean into it to stay upright and steady yourself. You have to lean into the disruption, lean into the thing that is pushing on you. Peter leans into the change by stepping out onto the chaos rather than protecting himself, then starts sinking, and in vulnerability reaches out his hand to ask for help. Through it all, he finds Jesus' compassion.

Lori Gottlieb takes a risk to live full-heartedly despite living in a reality of an unknown health situation. It could've made her sink. Instead, she chose to risk it and live even more fully—making parenting choices about how to love her son the best right now.

Change can feel like being in a boat battered by chaotic wind and waves. We are all bound to experience it. This is not the surprise of life. This story can suggest to us that the miraculous surprise of life is courage, compassion and companionship. That the more vulnerable you are, the more courageous you feel—individually and in our community together. That we may live fully from our hearts, letting down our guard.

And if you can't remember that, think of Peter reaching out his hand for help, then take a walk down the hill by the library and spend some time with the sculpture there. Its called

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<sup>5</sup> Ending a sentence with a preposition? I know, the English major in me cringes. I did it for emphasis. ☺

“Waist Deep,” and you can read more about it, but when you see it, let it inspire you to hold out your own hand as an effort to let God be with you. To let others be with you. And to be with others in times of change, so that we might build a community of trust and transformation in the face of that change, remembering that God is a God who is WITH us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

**Benediction**

Friends, be of good courage. Take heart. Lean into the vulnerability to be present today to what calls you. God’s steady love is with you. Know that wherever you go, God’s loving presence goes with you. Amen.