

Calm(in)g the Storm
Matthew 8: 18 – 27
First United Church of Christ, Northfield
March 21, 2021
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May God still speak through these words of scripture and sermon.

Maybe you already know this, but the life of faith is no easy road. If we had any doubts about this, we need only listen to Jesus' interaction with those desiring to be faithful people in this story from the Gospel of Matthew. His words are stark, they seem to lack compassion. A religious professional comes to Jesus and says, I will follow you. Jesus retorts, are you sure you are ready for the uncertainty of not even knowing where you will sleep night after night? Then one of his disciples, someone already committed comes sharing news of a death in the family, looking for affirmation to pause and bury their loved one. And Jesus' pastoral response? "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead." I can guarantee that this response would have flunked Jesus from the seminary pastoral care class.

Even so, the disciples follow Jesus into a boat because he has decided to get away from the crowds and go to the other side of the lake. As luck would have it there would be more shaking – not just from words that seem unconcerned about real life and its balancing act- now there is shaking from a great windstorm that has swooped in to disturb the waters further.

And where is Jesus? Asleep! Even with waves crashing about, fear and terror expressed by the ship hands, cries of save us- Jesus is sound asleep. When they awake him, you would think he would be grateful- their warnings saving him. Instead, Jesus chastises them for their lightweight faith and proceeds to rebuke the wind and the sea to a dead calm. Even though those in the boat have committed their lives to following Jesus, they still ask – who is this? Who is this person that the seas and the wind obey?

Where is the healing in this story? This is a tale included in our series on Healing: A Season of Recovery, but it is not self-evident where a source of healing can be found in this compilation. For all his prickliness however, Jesus responds to need and shows us some patterns worth emulating.

On the surface Jesus's response to those qualifying their investment in the business of Jesus is discomforting and rude. At its root, Jesus is inviting them to dive deeper into the waters of their faith. In his response to all that swirls about him Jesus notes "life happens, on what are you going to lean it when it does?"

There is healing in the boat too. First, there is Jesus' impulse to get away from the burgeoning crowd- to take a break, and a breath from the on-demand healer/teacher/leader that he is. This retreat habit is lifesaving for Jesus- hint, hint, for us too. Shaking up and quieting the routine not just when life has become too much is a rhythm we need to foster.

There is also healing amid the storm. For those of you seasoned lakers in the land of 10,000 lakes, how many of you know from experience that it is risky to get in a boat in the afternoon to head to the other side and expect that it will go well? Storms happen. Winds whip up. Waves crash. The current

fights back. I learned the hard way about my casual ignorance of canoeing a lake in Maine in the afternoon wondering if we would make it back to our campsite alive.

We take calculated risks, and our plans go awry. In the middle of that storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus showed us two modes of healing: calm in the storm and calming the storm.

The calm center to the point of sleep that Jesus exhibits does not happen after the storm, but right in the thick of it. Jesus' calm center expects the storm and finds a way to be centered within it and in spite of it. I don't think Jesus' ability to sleep in the storm is a sign of divine reward for a deep faith rather Jesus has found a way through practice, retreat, insight and acceptance- to trust. In seminary we were coached to be the non-anxious presence in the room. It takes practice and a grounded relationship with God to be that calming presence and Jesus demonstrates he too was schooled in the ways of non-anxious presence.

It is also important to note that the disciples are doing a plenty good job of holding all the anxiety in the situation. There is a strange partnership to Jesus' calm that almost enables him the ability to let go to the point of sleep. Healing is a combination of our grounded faith and partners who hold the angst with us.

Jesus also shows us that some storms need to be calmed. There are "storms" that need to be rebuked and stopped dead in their tracks and we need to take responsibility for our contributions to their occurrence. There are storms to rebuke around us right now. It is time to rebuke the storm of anti-Asian rhetoric and actions. It is well past time to rebuke a culture that accepts violence against women. It is time to rebuke careless policies and practices that accelerate climate change. Rebuking has its place on the healing journey. So does truth-telling.

In this manner, I see something of Jesus in Greta Thunberg, the Swedish young adult who catalyzed a youth movement in the face of climate change. The first time I heard Greta speak to adults with moral clarity and scolding it was shocking but so appropriate. Listen to her words before the annual convention of CEOs and world leaders at the World Economic Forum meeting in Switzerland, "I want you to panic, I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act." Greta began her school strike with a flyer of facts about extinction rates and carbon budgets, and then sprinkled it with the cheeky sense of humor that has made her stubbornness go viral. "My name is Greta, I am in ninth grade, and I am school-striking for the climate," she wrote on each flyer. "Since you adults don't give a damn about my future, I won't either."¹

Healing actions are more than the light touch, the squeeze of the hand, the "there-there reassurance." Sometimes healing is telling the truth, unmasking the wounds, ferreting the cause of hurt, exposing it to the light so it can be dressed and bandaged and protected from further harm. In this way acts of justice have a healing dimension to them.

There is a story about villagers who kept finding abandoned babies in the river. One by one they took the babies in, fed, them nourished them, cared for their needs. In their actions there was healing but still the babies kept coming down the river. Finally, one day someone in the village asked, "shouldn't

¹ Time Magazine Person of the Year 2019, [Greta Thunberg](#)

we find out why these babies keep coming down the river and find a way to stop it?" Taking care of the babies was compassionate but addressing the reason for finding them in the river in the first place truly saved their lives. Calling out the storm of injustice is an act of healing.

The demands of following Jesus are great. He shows us that sometimes we must make extraordinary efforts to move in a new direction. To follow Jesus, we must "cross over" lands and seas. We must leave behind what we know in order to do a new thing. It might be hard. It might be terrifying. But it is our calling and because Jesus has shown us that God is with us and in us, we can move in new directions. We want to be "saved" by something or someone else, but we discover that we are in the boat with the One who shows us our power to turn it around, to be both calm in the storm and to calm the storm. Thanks be to God. Amen.