

**The 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: August 13, 2017**

**Proper 14: Matthew 14: 22-33: *Be Not Afraid***

**Preached**

**By**

**The Rev. John E. Higginbotham**

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**Author and humorist Mark Twain referred to Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee when he was visiting the Holy Land with his wife. They spent one night at a resort along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was a particularly beautiful night with a full moon over the water that made for an especially romantic setting. So, the Twains decided that they wanted to go on a moonlit boat ride. Twain approached one of the local fishermen and asked him how much he would charge to take them out in a boat. The man looked at Twain with his white suit, hat, shirt, and shoes and took him to be a rich man. “For you, my friend, it is \$25!” the fisherman replied. Now, this was back when \$25 was a lot of money. Twain knew it was certainly too much for a boat ride. He turned to walk away grumbling to his wife, “I always wondered why Jesus walked on the Sea of Galilee. Now I know!”**

**So, my sisters and brothers in Christ, I want you to think for a moment about the scariest thing you have ever done in your life? It is usually a vivid image that comes to mind right away. The scariest thing for me was flying an airplane solo for the very first time with only 10 hours of flight time under my belt. Believe me when I say this, when the flight instructor got out of the airplane I begged Jesus Christ to get in. At times throughout our lives, all of us have been afraid so we can easily sympathize with Simon Peter. Peter is all of us because he is the personification of our human nature. Impetuously he told Jesus that he wanted to imitate him and walk to him on the water. But then he looked down at the waves and became suddenly fearful and began to sink.**

**After feeding the 5,000, Jesus tells his disciples to get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side while he dismisses the crowd. Then, he goes up on a mountainside by himself to pray. By the time Jesus finishes praying, his disciples are a considerable distance from land. A sudden storm has come up and the boat is being buffeted by the wind and the waves. The disciples are growing fearful. Then, shortly before dawn, they see something that really terrifies them. Out on the water, they see something coming toward them; they think is a ghost. It is not. It is Jesus walking toward them on the sea.**

**Jesus says to them: "Take heart! It is I. Do not be afraid." "Lord, if it's you,"**

**Peter replies bravely, “command me to come to you on the water.” And Jesus simply says, “Come.” Peter gets out of the boat, walks on the water, and comes toward Jesus. But then he starts thinking about what he’s doing. He notices the wind and the waves swirling around him and he starts to wonder whether this is such a good idea after all. The Sea of Galilee is cold and deep, and he’s not wearing a life-preserver. And then it happens. He begins to sink. This tough, burly, out-spoken fisherman is afraid of drowning. Peter is a fisherman. It begs the question, literally, for Pete’s sake doesn’t he know how to swim? Peter cries out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately, Jesus reaches out his hand and catches him. “You of little faith,” Jesus says, “why did you doubt?” And when they climb into the boat, the wind dies down. Then the disciples, including Simon Peter begin to worship Jesus, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”**

**My sisters and brothers, our gospel story from Matthew today clearly illustrates our human nature because all of us know what it is like to begin a daunting venture and then pull back because of fear. Fear is, of course, a universal emotion. Everybody is afraid of something. According to psychologists, we are born with two fears when we come into the world, fear of loud noises and fear of falling. It does not take us long, however, to accumulate many other fears, fear of the dark, fear of lightning and thunder,**

**fear of dogs, fear of other people, etc. For many people this list continues to grow over a lifetime, fear of heights, fear of closed in spaces, fear of trains or planes, and many others.**

**Fear is a universal emotion. Many of us, unfortunately, are bound by our fears. But, let's face it, this is a hostile and violent world we live in. Think about North Korea's threats and the President's comments last Tuesday using the words, "fire and fury like the world has never seen." Everywhere we look and we see chaos, death, brinkmanship and decay and we are afraid. It is a terrible feeling to be afraid. We can be paralyzed by fear of such things as losing our job, our marriage, our health, our fortune, our life, our sense of peace and security. Matthew tells us that the disciples were terrified. Jesus said to them, "Take heart! (I translate that to mean "take courage.") "Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid."**

**Here's what we need to see: Jesus doesn't want us to be prisoners to fear. I believe Jesus is saying that there are times we have good reason to be fearful, but think how much joy is taken out of our lives by our constant obsession and worry with the things we fear and the things we cannot control. Jesus doesn't want fear to rob us of our joy or our effectiveness as His disciples. Jesus doesn't want to see us shrink back from responsibilities to our spouses,**

families, loved ones, friends, our church, our community and most of all ourselves because of fear. Remember, what Jesus says to his terrified disciples when they see him walking toward them that night on the sea. "Take courage! It is I. Do not be afraid." This was but one of many, many times that people in the Bible are told, "Be not afraid." If there is one thing many of us need, it is more courage and less fear.

I have to tell you this delightful little anecdote about Peter Cartwright, a famous revivalist preacher of his day. In October of 1818, President Andrew Jackson decided to visit a revival service in Nashville where the controversial Peter Cartwright was scheduled to speak. As it happened, the General entered as Cartwright was reading Mark 8:36, "*For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*" When Cartwright's church learned that the President was coming, the elders warned Cartwright not to offend the President. You see, at that time, the President could seriously influence a religious denomination for the better or worse. Anyway, the elders of the church had no desire to have President Jackson angry at them. So, they insisted that Cartwright must not offend the President. They were wasting their time. When Cartwright got up to speak, the first words out of his mouth were the following: "I understand that President Andrew Jackson is here this morning. I have been requested to be very guarded in my remarks. Let me say

**this: Andrew Jackson will go to hell if doesn't repent of his sin!" The entire congregation gasped in shock. This was no way to talk to the President of the United States though I think it is kind of refreshing. After the service, Andrew Jackson met Cartwright at the door looked him in the eye and said, "Sir, if I had a regiment like you I could conquer the world!" President Jackson evidently appreciated meeting a person of such conviction and courage.**

**My sisters and brothers in Christ, if Andrew Jackson could conquer the world with people like Peter Cartwright, think what Jesus could do with Christian people like you and me with conviction in our bellies and courage burning in our hearts. Being a follower of Jesus isn't for wimps. It's for those who are willing to do whatever it takes to live in and bring about God's Kingdom on this earth. So what do I mean by that? The Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of the heart. The Kingdom of God is a Kingdom of conscience. It is a Kingdom of love from which flows caring, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice and peace among all people founded solidly on God's love. That's the kind of devotion Jesus needed from Simon Peter. That's the kind of devotion, conviction, courage and fearlessness Jesus needs from you and me.**

**Throughout the Gospels, Simon Peter is more of a reed blowing in the wind than a rock. Fortunately, after Pentecost, Jesus got more than that out of**

**Simon Peter. Peter became a rock for the early church. Saints Peter and Paul became the acknowledged leaders and founders of the Christian church.**

**My brothers and sister, there is an assumption in the American church today that says you can be a Christian but not be a disciple. I believe that is complete nonsense, because to be a Christian is to be a disciple. Christianity is not some ridiculous country club that you join because all your pals have joined. The church is not a country club for people who are merely fans of this man Jesus. Jesus wants disciples with conviction burning in their bellies and courage bursting forth from their hearts, not fans and not a bunch of sideline sitters with a lot of talk and no action. Jesus wants people who will walk in his footsteps. Jesus wants people who will deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. Here's the challenge, can Jesus count on us? My brothers and sisters, as disciples of Jesus Christ, is Holy Trinity Church a people of courage, a people of fearlessness, a people of conviction who will give our very best to serve him by living our lives as people living in the Kingdom God. I think so. I have great hope because only the Kingdom of God can stop the fearful rhetoric of "fury and fire in a way the world has never seen." Jesus challenges us, "Come! Get out of the boat. Walk on the water with me. It is I. Have faith in me. Have courage and be not afraid. AMEN.**