

Sink, Swim, or Walk
Sermon on Matthew 14:22-33 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, August 7, 2005

There is a longstanding debate within the coaching community as to the best method of teaching children to swim: Do you introduce kids to the water slowly, gradually going from a dip of the toe, to standing calf-deep, to wading, to putting your face under, etc. or do you toss them in and see what happens? Of course, we call it the “sink or swim” method, and we use the term in lots of non-aquatic arenas: freshman year of college, a tour of duty in a foreign country, a new job, your first year of marriage. Sink or swim has come to define any situation in which we must save ourselves by our own means or else fail.

Sink or swim thinking operates on a strict either-or dichotomy where the world is black or white, right or wrong, up or down. In a sink or swim world, you have a decision to make between two—and only two—options. This kind of thinking dominates our approach to contemporary life, especially in politics. Candidates to the federal bench deserve an up or down vote. You’re either for the war in Iraq or against it. You support the death penalty, or you abhor it. Pro-life or pro-choice. Red state or blue state. Conservative or liberal. One way or another, you’re either with us or against us. It also tends to creep into religion: You attend either traditional or contemporary worship. You’re mainline or independent. You read the Bible literally or metaphorically. Every word must be true or none of it is reliable. If you’re not born again, or can’t speak in tongues, or otherwise fail to pass any number of carefully constructed spiritual aptitude tests, then you can’t be a Christian!

What is missing from all of these conversations is a realization that our world is not simply two-dimensional, or even three-dimensional, but multi-dimensional. The world is not strictly black or white or even several shades of gray, but bursting with incredibly vivid and

vibrant colors. We don't move strictly up or down, but sideways and back-and-forth and even around and around. And the moral world, which to be sure is governed by the discernible poles of right and wrong, is a complex and many-layered reality offering us a myriad of choices.

This story, often referred to as the miracle of Jesus walking on the water, at first suggests that faith, like so much else in our lives, is a matter of sink or swim. Or to be more accurate, a matter of sink or walk: When Peter has faith, he walks on water. When that faith wavers, he sinks. So often we are told that regarding faith, it's all or nothing. You believe or you don't. You accept on faith, no questions asked, or you aren't a "true believer." God said it; I believe it; that settles it. That, my friends, seems a very little, a very small, indeed a very poor place in which to live and move and have one's being. Never to have questions, never to doubt, never to wonder about other possibilities is not only inhuman, it is to lack completely the capacity for any faith at all. Questions, doubts, a willingness to explore certain questions—these are the necessary preconditions for faith. For unless we have the freedom to question and probe and examine and wonder, then we cannot freely respond to that which God graciously offers us.

Now some may say that it was easier to have faith in the old days. After all, things were simpler then. You fished or farmed or kept the kids. There wasn't the clutter that fills our modern lives. Now we have to manage mega-corporations and multi-task. But that is just the historical amnesia talking. Life was not so simple for the disciples out there on the sea, battling a roaring wind and raging waters. No less than one-third of their group were professional fishermen, men who made their lives and careers on the waters of the Sea of Galilee. And yet they were afraid.

They were afraid for good reason. The waters that were their workaday world also represented the forces of death and destruction. In biblical thought, the sea itself is a threat,

“representing all the anxieties and dark powers that threaten the goodness of the created order.”¹

The sea represents “the forces of chaos, held at bay in the creative act of God, but always threatening.”² In these supposedly simpler times, you went to work each day faced with the very real possibility of death. It was only God who kept you from perishing in the murky deep.

And so we find the disciples in the midst of a real crisis: they are out in the middle of the sea at three or four in the morning, a storm with strong winds and high waves is raging all around them, and Jesus is nowhere to be found. He had sent them on ahead in order that he might finally retreat to the mountain in order to pray. Now, as they faced the very real prospect of being flung into the churning waters and descending to a watery grave, at the very moment they need him, Jesus who mediates the presence of God is not with his disciples. In fact, Matthew continually stresses just how far apart they are: Jesus had forced them into the boat, which is now in the middle of the sea, far from land, and Jesus is alone, by himself.

So many of us gathered here know that feeling only too well: that in a time of crisis, in an hour of need, we are very far from the presence of God. Maybe that time was the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the end of a relationship, or a sudden threatening illness. The winds of change come up unexpectedly, the waves of uncertainty rise, and the small craft we sail on the sea of life is suddenly imperiled. Storm-tossed, wind-lashed, and weather-beaten, we may wonder where God is. The skeptics say there is no God, no one to cry to for help. At that point, you are on your own. Make the best of a bad situation. Sink or swim.

But God does not abandon us in our time of crisis, just as he did not abandon the disciples struggling in the boat. Knowing their need and seeing their struggle, Jesus came to them, walking on the water. Eugene Boring wryly points out that “Whereas the western mind

¹ M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New Interpreters Bible, vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 327.

² Ibid.

thinks of defying the law of gravity, the biblical mind thinks of the one who overcomes the power of chaos” by walking on and thus conquering the water. The Psalms tell us “[God’s] way was through the sea, [his] path through the mighty waters” (77:19). “[God] alone ... trampled the waves of the sea” (Job 9:8). God in the person of Jesus was coming to help them; curiously, however, the disciples did not—perhaps could not—recognize him. They only grew more terrified, crying out, “It is a ghost!” How telling that these men who had walked with Jesus and learned from him and seen his miracles could not recognize Jesus for their fear.

And so Jesus speaks: “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” (Mt. 14:27). In the midst of their terror and doubt and confusion, Jesus speaks three words. First, a word of encouragement: “Take heart.” Be strong and of good courage. Second, a word of revelation: “It is I.” What Jesus really says is, “I am.” It is the divine name, the name of God, the God who will deliver his people from their bondage in Egypt. Jesus reveals himself as belonging to the God who saves. Third, Jesus speaks a word of reassurance: “Do not be afraid.” It is perhaps the most often repeated commandment in the Bible. We are not to be afraid because “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18), and God loves us perfectly, ready and willing to save us.

And that, brothers and sisters, is good news in a sink or swim world. God does not abandon us or leave us up to our own devices in the midst of a storm. We do not have to save ourselves. Salvation becomes God’s third way. When God calls us to join him not only on a placid sea, but even in the raging, storm-tossed waves of life, we can walk because God is there. We step out onto the waters in faith, looking at Jesus, who subdues the waters by walking on them. The challenge of faith is to maintain our focus on Jesus: It is only when Peter notices the storm and the wind and the waves that his faith begins to falter. And this is how we live our lives of faith—we want to respond to Jesus’ command, but we look around us and see the waves;

we try to move forward in faith, only to be buffeted by the winds of doubt. Of course, in the words of the old hymn, “the howling storms of doubt and fear assail.” When they do, and our faith is weak, we have only to look to Jesus, for “Jesus is there to save *despite* inadequate faith.”³ In a sink or swim world, walking by faith is God’s third option. It is faith that believes that God is with us in Jesus Christ, and when we cannot even walk by faith, we have only to cry, “Lord, save me!” and Jesus, who is mighty to save, will stretch out his hand and rescue us.

³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* vol. 2, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) 509.