Faith and the Time of Change

Matthew 14:22-23
Delivered by Mother Renee 8/11/02

A tale is told about a small town that had historically been "dry," but a local businessman decided to build a tavern. A group of Christians from a local church were concerned and planned an all-night prayer meeting to ask God to intervene. It just so happened that shortly thereafter lightning struck the bar and it burned to the ground. The owner of the bar sued the church, claiming that the prayers of the congregation were responsible, but the church hired a lawyer to argue in court that they were not responsible.

The presiding judge, after his initial review of the case, stated that "no matter how this case comes out, one thing is clear. The tavern owner believes in prayer and the Christians do not."

Today's reading from Matthew and that story about this town both speak about faith. In the story of the town it was the faith of the church that could be called into question because in their denial of responsibility in causing the bar to be demolished they were admitting that they didn't really believe that God could do what they had asked God to do. In the story from the gospel it is the faith of the disciples, most especially Peter, which was being revealed. Don't you just love Peter? The Bible paints this picture of Peter as a person who always talks a good game. He means well but just when the chips are down Peter goes down with them. In this story Peter sees Jesus walking on water and he wants to do it too. So he starts out walking and everything seems to be going just fine until something happens and Peter's faith in his ability to finish what he has started quickly comes to an end. In Peter's case it was the presence of the wind, the force of it made him acutely aware of what he was doing and so he began to focus not on the possibility of walking on water but on the impossibility of walking on water. For the church folk in that fictitious town they acted as if they believed that God could provide a miraculous answer

to their situation but when it happened and they were going to be held accountable for putting this thing into motion, they suddenly began to question God's ability to answer prayers. They no longer had faith.

This is an interesting story about the disciples, isn't it? Jesus apparently had to force them to go into the boat and they did what he asked. You would think that their obedience would have been enough to ensure them safe and smooth passage to the other side of the sea. If we are obedient, that is, if we do what God has called us to do, then life should proceed effortlessly and without conflict and problem. But that's not the case here is it? The disciples did what they were told, they got into the boat but the winds picked up and blew so fiercely in the wrong direction that they were unable to reach the land on the other side. They were afraid, very much afraid. They were especially afraid when they saw a ghost walking on the water towards them. When the ghost identified himself as Jesus, Peter sprung into action. "Command me to come, Jesus," Peter cried out. And when Jesus did just that Peter started out strong but eventually his faith was tested and he began to falter.

How many us of can see ourselves in this story? How many here can see in their own lives times in which they may have acted in obedience and then when their faith was tested they began to lose heart? I'll share a personal story. In 1987 or '88 God called me to go to seminary. I didn't not want to think about the possibility that I might be called to be a leader of a congregation so I focused my efforts of being prepared to teach in a seminary or university. The next 8 years or so people kept telling me that they really believed that God was calling me to work in the church. Eventually I began to accept that as true. God was calling me to become a priest and so I started the process for Holy

Orders with every thing going smoothly and uneventfully. I knew that the possibility existed that I might have to spend additional time in an Anglican seminary because the seminary I had graduated from was a Baptist one. But there was also the possibility that I would be allowed to do a tutorial in which I could read and study with a local priest to cover the material I needed. I also knew that it would have been very difficult for me to go to an Episcopal seminary even for one year because the closest one was in NY and I had responsibilities at home with teenage children and a husband these responsibilities would have made my moving to NY next to impossible. My prayer was that I be allowed to do the tutorial and not go to seminary. In faith I started the process of becoming a priest and everything seemed to be falling into place and I was certain that if it were God's will for me to be a priest things would go relatively smoothly.

After a series of interviews and psychological testing and mounds of paperwork the Commission on Ministry, that's the diocesan committee who decides along with the Bishop who's in and who's out for the priesthood, made their ruling on my case. At that time two of the commission members attended Grace Church. One Sunday morning before the 9:30 service one of these two commission members came to me and told me that the commission decided that I would have to go to seminary after all. I was devastated because all I could see was the impossibility of it. I could not leave my family but neither would I move my family just for one year so that I could study in NYC. I could not abandon my obligation to my children, not even for one year. The situation was hopeless. Or at least it seemed so at the time. That Sunday morning upon hearing this news, I knew that what I needed to do was pray and praying from the pew didn't seem sufficient so I decided to come to kneel at the altar. I also knew that I couldn't pray because I was not

able to say or even think the words needing to be said. As I was coming towards the altar I saw Fr. Elliott and I asked him to pray for me. I told him very briefly what had happened and together we knelt at the altar and he prayed. I wish I could tell you that suddenly as I stood to leave the altar someone from the commission approached me and said that it was a big mistake; I would not be required to go to seminary after all. But it didn't happen that way. I felt better after the prayer. I had communicated with God. I had shared my pain with someone else who I knew would also continue to pray for me but I still had to struggle with the dilemma of what I thought was choosing between my family and my call to the priesthood.

Within a couple of months I had to make my decision because it would soon be September. Over the next couple of months I continued to think about and even pray about it but I felt stuck between the two choices. And in being stuck I was making a decision, even though it was a passive decision. I was deciding not to go to seminary. Sometime in June I received a call from a priest in Camden, Derrick Wedderburn. I had met him once when I visited his church and knew that he was on the Commission. He called to ask me if I had gotten the financial aid forms from the Diocese. I told him I had. He was curious why I had not submitted them. I told him of my dilemma. His question to me was simple. "Were you called to be a priest?" "Yes," I responded. "Then you need to have faith that everything will work out and plan to go to seminary to do what you need to do." That conversation turned my thinking and my life around. You see, prior to this conversation with Fr. Wedderburn I was like Peter, walking on the water and then feeling the wind swirling around me. I lost sight of what I was called to do and began to sink from the weight of the fear. Fr. Wedderburn reminded me that Jesus was there with an outstretched

hand reaching out towards me and I had but to grab it. And I did grab it and as it turned out I only needed to attend seminary one semester, not two. And with the assistance from the diocese, this parish and from other parishes I was able to stay on campus only one night a week while commuting a couple of days on Amtrak. If I had not recognized or better yet, if someone had not pointed out to me my lack of faith I still would be sitting in the pew, waiting to be ordained. I would not be doing what God had called me to do.

Why did I tell this rather long personal story? Because I know that my experience is not unique. Perhaps you aren't struggling with a call to the priesthood but perhaps you have sensed that God wants you or called you do something that rationally you feel unable to do. It could be a personal decision related to you work or your home life. It could be an action related to your work in the church or your relationship with the church. Consider what the faithful action is and what the rational reaction is. Lead with faith and see if Jesus will reach out his hand to you like he did to Peter and like he did to me.

Sometimes churches also undergo this same testing of faith so we also need to think about this on that level as well. God frequently calls churches to be or to do something they haven't been or done in the past. And I believe that this is true for this parish at this time. God is calling Grace Church to see itself differently and then to live in the world differently as a result. Many of us feel as though we have made so many changes around here in the past months. Changes in worship time. Changes in programming. Changes in how we handle stewardship. Changes in how we expect members to respond in their financial giving and in the giving of their time and talents to the life of this parish. We have been making changes and we will continue to make changes because the leadership, including the rector, the staff and the vestry, in addition to

others who have prayerfully entered into this dialogue between the church and God has come to see that God is calling us to grow in new and different ways. God is calling us to emphasis different things. To assume a different role in the community and the larger church. To explore different avenues and different possibilities of what it means to be spiritual people and a spiritual church. And in faith, our church is trying to respond.

But it is no easier for the church than it was for me and it is for you to be faithful. It's scary because we know what have today but if we change we won't know today what we'll be tomorrow. Peter saw and lived that struggle. He stepped out of the boat believing he could do what Jesus commanded him to do. But when he thought about it with his rational mind and not with his faith he began to falter and sink and he got scared. And if he could have he would have jumped back into the boat because he knew the boat, it was familiar and it was safe, safer than standing on the water in the middle of the sea tossed by the wind.

The faithfulness of this church is being tested because we are moving towards something new. And this is the time when your church needs you the most. This fall will usher in a new church year and in our endeavor for faithfulness Grace Church will undertake some new projects and make some changes. Some of this you may find comfortable and others you may not. Some you may understand, some you may not. Some you may agree with and some you won't. The bottom line for Grace Church, many of us have come to believe, is this: we are a church in transition. God is calling us to grow and we are moving in faithfulness in that direction. If this is your place of worship and if you financially support the ministries of the church at any level you are integrally a part of who we are. And if you are a part of this parish your church needs your faith. We also need

your ideas, your reaction, your opinions and your support. Grace Church needs you to be involved in our struggle with us so that we can see and know God's vision for us as a people and then work to live out that vision.

What am I asking you to do? I'm not asking you to worry or panic. Don't assume that the rood screen is coming down or the altar is moving away from the wall. Don't assume that the 8 o'clock service won't be Rite I and the other services Rite II. But do assume that we are facing a time of change. And we are going to faithfully respond to that, we will change. But the changes will be more related to how we talk about and live out our faith. The changes will involve our spiritual awareness and personal expressions and our service in the church and in the community. But like Peter, these changes can make us fearful if we fail to keep our eyes and minds and hearts focused on the command of Christ.

What am I asking you to do? To participate as fully as possible in the life of this parish. Push yourself more than you've ever pushed yourself before to help meet the needs here, to grow here and to be faithful here. To help us discover and live out God's vision for this parish and to be faithful even as the storms rise and we feel weak and challenged and afraid to go on. Perhaps yours is the voice we need to hear when we approach God's altar in fear and hopelessness not sure of the next step. Perhaps yours will be the voice that we will hear praying for us and encouraging us to stay faithful and live out the vision.

Change and transitions are scary. We all know that. But the answer is never to stay unchanged. Especially when God has called you to do something different or to be something different. Then, change must happen. I am asking you to pray for the faithfulness of this church. Pray for its leaders and all its members. Pray for your own

faith as well. Pray that we will not be like Peter, that we won't falter, but if we do, pray that we have enough courage to reach and take Jesus' hand and go on.

Let us pray.

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