

One thing I appreciate about our tradition, about our Scriptures. The earliest Church was so confident about Jesus, they knew they could afford to be very honest about themselves and their own shortcomings. The Bible wastes little time with flattering self-portraits of Jesus's earliest followers; there's no revisionist history going on. This truthfulness about our ancestors in the faith—lots of times the 12 apostles acted like doofuses—gives us permission to see the truth and tell the truth about ourselves, too.

Jesus was in that boat along with His disciples, the ones following Him (both Matthew's code language for "His A Team".) These are not outsiders, not novices. The test comes, this storm on the Sea of Galilee, and they fail miserably. Jesus is exasperated, yet again: "You cowards! (Not too strong a translation.) Why are you all so afraid? Why have you such little trust?" (From time to time I hear those too sophisticated to actually commit themselves to join or support Jesus' Church complain that it's too hypocritical. "But of course," I say. "What else could we be? It's just us sinners. But there's always room for one more." Which reminds me: some of you have been asking about becoming members of this church. We have two informational sessions planned following Worship in early May, but you don't have to wait for those. You are welcome to join any time you wish. Anyway, all the way back to Jesus—it's been just us sinners in His Boat—and see what our Lord has done anyway!)

In its earliest setting, this gospel lesson was understood to be referring to the Church, plural, and the dangers the Church kept facing and how it responded to those dangers. The "boat" has long been a metaphor for Christ's Church, vulnerable against the waves and storms of Empire, of persecution, of martyrdom. In many lands today, this is still the situation. But we in the American Church are vulnerable to complacency and carelessness. On a foggy night, the captain of the British royal yacht noted an oncoming ship on collision course. He communicated, "Please yield. We have the right of way." The opposing ship was not cooperating. With greater urgency, the captain instructed this other ship. "You are instructed to make way." A non-committal response. Finally, the gap between them closing quickly, the captain sent this message: "This is the HMS Britannia, and Her Majesty the Queen is on board. You are ordered to change your position." The other ship cabled back, "Be that as it may, we will not change position. We are a lighthouse."

Our translations do not do justice to what Matthew is describing. This is not just a severe storm: the followers of Jesus face, literally, a tsunami. (The cause is literally an earthquake, a "seismos," which causes the life-threatening waves.) At the risk of sounding alarmist, I am aware that the Church in the west is facing an earthquake of opposition—and most of us have not even been aware of it. Within just the past few years the ground is shifting so fast it's hard to keep track of. Parents who dared to homeschool their children in Germany, land of Martin Luther, were put behind bars earlier this year and their children forcibly seized by the State. Perfectly in accord with the constitution of the European Union—it was legal but very chilling. Strange what "diversity" actually means now in Europe. In Sweden a pastor has been likewise serving time in prison for daring to preach what he believes the Bible says. So much for any real "tolerance" in that mecca of social enlightenment, Sweden, where anything goes. But surely such things could never happen here, the land of the free?

Prison Fellowship, which has for decades been successfully helping to train prisoners to become productive citizens upon their release, was sued last year for offering their program to prisoners in Indiana. Neither the judge nor any witnesses disputed that their rehabilitation program is the most effective there is; I don't think there were any prisoner complaints. Prisoners were free to enlist or not enlist in the program. But they dared to teach that Jesus is the One who sets us free. The judge not only ruled against them, but fined this non-profit with a sterling track record \$1.1 million for—in my humble opinion—daring to advance Jesus in the public square. Quite a fine to be levied for their crime against “tolerance.”

[It is perfectly acceptable for public school teachers to demean and defame the Church—but watch out for the lawyers if any should dare to speak for Christ's Church. How do I know? In one local school other religions are favorably depicted, in the state-mandated curriculum. Christianity is not studied at all—not enough time—but is gratuitously blamed by the teacher as the source of wars, the source of the ills which plague the western world. (You will be hearing more and more of this ignorance in the years to come, attacking and blaming Christ's people: a good place to begin to become better educated is to read *The Victory of Reason*, by Rodney Stark.)]

The disciples of Jesus were not worrying about any of this. They were scared they were going to drown. What dangers most frighten you? What concerns keep robbing you of your peace, if you let them? What do you do with them?

His followers finally gave up and turned to Jesus in great desperation. They're panicked, terror-stricken, and there's Jesus catching up on His sleep after a long night of praying.

Makes you wonder what He knew that they did not.

Finally, wild-eyed, when it's all but too late, they wake Him. They wake Jesus with a great prayer from the heart. In the original language, three very brief words: “Lord! Save! Dying!”

Their timing may be a bit late, but they get this part right. In time of danger we need a “Lord.” (He was called “Teacher” in the previous paragraph—but in calling Him “Lord” they acknowledge His authority; acknowledge He can save them.) Waiting in the ICU emergency room; when our memory lapses are becoming so alarming we cannot pretend otherwise; when we need to let our loved ones go out into dangerous circumstances; when we can no longer avoid our addictions—we need more than a teacher. His followers do not need from Jesus more education, more lessons on positive thinking, more breathing exercises. These may be OK—but these alone cannot stand against a tsunami, cannot overcome the darkness, cannot allow me to see my own “shadow,” my own sinfulness, cannot guard me against the evil one. I cannot lift myself by my own bootstraps in the spiritual realm any more than I can in the physical one. In great danger, we need to be rescued. This work is too big for us: it's work for a Lord.

(Earlier this week my son Matthew went over to visit one of his buddies from the same 9th grade basketball team. His friend has the same “buzz” haircut Matt has, but not for reasons of convenience or fashion. His friend has already undergone exploratory brain surgery to explore a tumor. He is confined to his bedroom, for now, and was experiencing pain in his legs following a procedure in his back. His friend is in good spirits, and perked up a lot as his friends came by to look in on him—but his mom must

be so very concerned. We are grateful for the physicians and staff at CHOC who will be caring for Matt's friend—but in his situation he needs more than deft surgeons. He is calling out to his Lord!)

When His followers finally come to Jesus and wake Him up with their urgent prayer: “Lord! Save! Dying!” surely He would commend them, compliment them? This is the fascinating part. Jesus is not impressed. In fact, He lays into them. “Why are you all so afraid? Why such cowards?” (This doesn't seem very nice. What about their self-esteem? He sure doesn't show very effective pastoral counseling skills.) But Jesus answers His own question: “Why are you all so afraid?” “Because you all have such little trust.”

This is what really bothers Jesus. Four times in this gospel Jesus chastises His followers for their little trust. This is more important to Him than having nice manners, proper parenting skills, good morals, religious instruction, finding a lucrative career. You can tell by Jesus' response that this question of how they trust is so significant to Him. (After all, every good parent or friend understands these same dynamics. What gets you most irritated about your kids? Isn't it when you see them ignoring or flouting the very rule or theme or principle you have been emphasizing over and over and over again? And isn't that because you have chosen to emphasize it because you know it is essential to their welfare, their growth, and they ignore it at their peril? It's one thing if your child forgets to brush her teeth now and then—but if he forgets to look ways before walking across the busy street after you have warned over and over again: that evokes a different response from you, because although a child may not, you recognize what is at stake!)

We get most frustrated with our loved ones when those things we believe most important are violated—assuming, of course, we care about them in the first place. Jesus got frustrated with His followers because He cared so much about them. We don't tend to spend much energy with people we don't much care about.

Jesus hates that His followers are showing such little trust because, obviously, it is so important to Jesus that they do. Their little trust cancels the effectiveness of His entire mission—it negates everything He came to earth to accomplish! He didn't come to tell us to help ourselves, to plant nice flowers, to get along with people, even to behave. He came saying, “The Kingdom of God is among you. God has a different plan for the world than you would ever imagine on your own. You are now a new creation! You have been set free! The Creator of all knows you and loves you—would not harm a hair on your head. God has an assignment for you, is counting on you to live in and extend the Kingdom.”

Living in “little trust” we isolate ourselves from God's healing love, from God's Spirit of power. We hold ourselves unavailable to God; we keep ourselves and others, indirectly, stuck in our darkness, our fear, our former ways. We compromise His effectiveness, His reputation, His glory. (It's not just about “me.”)

Had Jesus come to tell us more religious facts, or initiate us into secret spiritual knowledge (as the Gnostics were to proclaim) He wouldn't have been so hurt and upset by our little trust. Had He come to share with us another Law such as that given to Moses, only a more rigorous one; Had He come to us as therapist, to teach us to better get us in touch with our feelings and make peace with our past, or as a manners coach, to show us how to be more successful in the world—had any of these been His primary

goal, then different shortcomings on the part of His followers might have bothered Him. But none of these was central to His mission. Our little trust is what really gets Him.

Can you hear His heavy heart behind the reprimand? The divine Gift, Jesus, has to us has come to us, daring to trust that we might be willing to enter into the kind of life He offers. He has come to invite us into His Kingdom—to live beyond pettiness, to live outside the prison of our egos, to live beyond the insatiable demands of “me first” and consumerism and materialism, beyond the psychic necessities of sizing up everyone around me from the vantage point of how they might stack up next to me. To enlarge our view to see others around us as beloved children of God. He has come to invite us into His Kingdom—in order that we rejoice, and grow, and freely invite others into His Kingdom. Jesus has entrusted to us His one great blessing, His hope, His message, His power to change the world. When we fail to trust in Him, we make Him powerless. Believe it or not, we make Him inconsequential.

He has instituted but one institution, one organism to embody and to live out and carry out His vision and hope for the world—His Church. We are His imperfect Church, His sinful Church, His hypocritical Church—but we still seem to be the only Church He’s got. When we fail to trust Him, to commit ourselves and our resources to Him, we continue to hamper His ability to work in the world. We perjure His witness, His promises, His testimony, His hopes, His overarching mission.

We should expect that the powers of evil should array against His church, and pass laws to hinder and penalize it at every turn. It is foolish to blame darkness for being darkness—what should we expect? We should know that people taught hatred and violence and intolerance should try to imprison and kill and torture His Christian followers precisely because they follow Him (I read that in Nigeria last week another public high school teacher who was a Christian was beaten to death by her students, fueled by those preaching another religion, when she dared to differ with what they had been taught.) We should expect that the evil one is always ready to wound and worry His sheep, to corrupt and distract His Church. [General Patton is said to have observe it was always more effective to wound the enemy to kill them, since every wounded soldier requires 3 other persons to care for him.] The enemy has learned this lesson well: we play into the wrong hands when we focus on and endlessly nurse our own injuries or grievances, past or present, real or imagined, as if our own drama were forever the main point—as if our Lord had no real use for us in His cause, as if there were no real point to our lives!) It’s not just about “me.”

Had Jesus been surrounded by novices, by people who barely knew Him, He would have responded differently. (I hope you are not misunderstanding me if you are someone maybe just newly checking out Jesus. “A smoldering wick He will not blow out; a bent reed He will not break in two.” He will never turn His back on whomever is moving toward Him. Know, if you are new to Jesus, that He is not harsh toward you, but is perfectly understanding about you and all you have been thru and all about your personal situation. If you are serious about knowing Him, you can bet your life He will come to you, reach you, reveal Himself to you in a way so that you, not someone else, may “get it.” He is already trying, despite your resistance, if you will let your guard down enough to notice.

But Jesus is not surrounded by newcomers in that boat, and most of you are not newcomers to Him. Many of you have been with Him, yielded to Him, serving Him, for

years—some for decades. You know Him. You know how it breaks His heart when we His people live in little trust; when we reduce the power of God thru us to whatever our own underutilized capacity might be, when we re-create God in our own diminished image.

Why were they so afraid while Jesus was not? What does He know that we forget, under pressure? Why is He not panicking, in fact snoozing?

Because Jesus knew the power of God to save, to protect, to make whole. Jesus knew the love of God which could not allow even one sparrow, surely not one person, to remain in danger unnoticed.

During Lent we identify with Jesus during His journey to Jerusalem. Jesus knew the black storm clouds were gathering; during Holy Week we will try to accompany Him into the heart of darkness in Jerusalem, even to the cross.

Jesus was not depressed, not oblivious, not living in denial, as He slept during that storm. He was practicing what He preaches. He knew who He was; He knew His authority—that all heaven and earth should submit to Him. (He is eagerly awaiting while we, His followers, grow our “little trust” so that we, too, will share and wield His authority and power for good, for the mission of God. He has shown us how.)

There was another horrible storm pounding a luxury liner at sea. The passengers were panicked; even the most experienced sailors, the professional staff, were very frightened. Everyone observed there was one young boy who was not afraid. Finally one of the passengers asked this 8-year old why he was not scared. “Because it’s my Daddy who is captain of this ship,” he said proudly.

Jesus did not forget who is the Captain of the ship, the Captain over all creation.

One of the great things, as you have been trusting in Jesus more and more over the years, is that His promises become more and more real in you. (We start out trusting in ourselves. We enter into the Church limited by what our image of the Church might be.) But as we learn to trust in God, as Jesus teaches us, everything begins to change. Imagine how you would respond to challenge and uncertainty and stresses and storms if you understood, deep down, that Jesus is always right next to you. (Apparently asleep, perhaps, if you have drifted far enough out of touch, but never absent, never afraid.) Imagine how we as a church would look and feel if we each trusted that Jesus were right next to us.

As you get older, you begin to learn there is no safe place to hide. Storms do strike; accidents do happen, companies fold, markets collapse, people die. You learn that in trying to safeguard yourself against every storm you only stop living. You come to understand there is no safe place to hide in this world.

But trust in Jesus. Wherever you are, whatever happens to you, as long as you are in the Boat with Jesus you are in the one safe place in all the universe.

Matthew 8:23-27

And when Jesus got into the boat, his disciples followed him. An earthquake [windstorm] arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but He was asleep.

And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And He said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm.

They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"