

## Jesus is There for Us

**Matthew 14:22-33**  
**August 13, 2023**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Pastor Dave Carlson**

In his book titled "A Pretty Good Person," theologian Lewis Smedes tells about spending hour-upon-hour at the Los Angeles county jail; he was bailing someone out. With the wheels of justice turning painfully slow, Smedes sat there waiting and watching.

"I watched the pimps in white suits bailing out their prostitutes," he said, "lawyers in black suits bailing out their clients; drug dealers bailing out their peddlers; girls bailing out their boyfriends; and drunks who disturbed the peace the night before slinking out on their own."

As this jailhouse parade passed by, said Smedes, "I began to see everyone in it as a full-time, obsessive-compulsive, addictive, hopeless loser." By noon, he'd "lost any desire to know any more about them...." So he decided to take a break.

As he stepped outside the building, Smedes saw a lanky black man wearing a black suit with a priest's collar. Figuring it was a prison chaplain, he introduced himself. Turns out he wasn't a priest; he was an insurance salesman.

This man devoted one day a week to bring a moment of grace to those locked up in jail. He wore the cloth so that everyone knew what he was up to.

"I asked him the sort of questions any decent Pharisee would ask," said Smedes. "Don't you keep meeting the same people coming in and going out? Recidivists, repeaters...? ...Aren't most of the men ... inside this jail hard-core losers?"

"Well, maybe they are," said the man, "but that's just not the way I divide people up. The only two categories of people I really care about are the forgiven people and the unforgiven people," those who turn to the Lord and those who don't.

"He had me," said Smedes. Later when Smedes got home, he said his wife, Doris, "I met Jesus today." "Oh yeah?" she said. "What did he say to you?"

“He told me I was a Pharisee.”<sup>1</sup>

If you were to meet Jesus out in the world today, how would you know it? What would you tell him about your day, what you’re going through right now? What you see unfolding in this world around you? And based on what you said, would he see you as a Pharisee or a follower?

In today’s New Testament lesson, the disciples have a surprise encounter with Jesus during a stormy moment in their lives, literally. They are in a boat being tossed around by the wind and waves.

Now, Bible commentators like Smedes will tell you that a boat in the Bible is often used as a symbol for the church, for a community of believers, like us. And wind and waves are the forces we’re up against, all the powerful, uncaring elements that can turn any calm seas of this world into a raging storm, robbing us of the peace and tranquility we so dearly want and need.

So here we have Jesus sending the disciples out into the world. As Matthew tells us, “He made (them) get into the boat without him and go on ahead to the other side (of the lake, the Sea of Galilee),” which is huge – about 7 miles across and 13 miles wide.

Jesus was left there alone, says Matthew. It was evening, says Matthew. The disciples were battered by the waves, says Matthew, far from land, the wind against them.

Matthew gives us a lot of detail here – Jesus nowhere in sight, darkness setting in, the disciples far from land, battered by waves, blown about by strong winds.

It doesn’t get much worse than that – not for the disciples that day, and not for us on our worst days, and even on some of our ordinary days. Being beaten down by the elements – by forces beyond our control – just seems to be part of life.

Maybe that’s why Matthew tells this story; so that followers of Jesus like us get a sense of what it’s like to be a Christian, what it’s like to come up against hostile forces in a largely indifferent world.

As the disciples battle the wind and the waves all night long, finally a little light begins to glow on the horizon. It’s early in the morning, says Matthew, and Jesus comes “walking towards them on the lake. But when (they see) him ..., they (are) terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they (cry) out in fear.”

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, *A Pretty Good Person: What It Takes to Live With Courage, Gratitude and Integrity* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990], 137-38.

OK folks, the disciples have been battling the wind and the waves, lost in a sea of pitch-black darkness, and this is the first time they cry out in fear – when they mistake Jesus for a ghost?!?

Isn't that just like us? We're standing strong battling the world around us, or we're slumped down hiding from all that's coming at us, and the last thing we think to do is call out to Jesus.

We're just like the disciples. We're able to fend for ourselves, we're used fighting our own battles. And too often, we just don't see it when Jesus is there for us, to help and support us, through scripture and prayer, through the counsel and compassion of others. We don't see it, appreciate it, accept it. So sad.

I'm sure this grieves Jesus, breaks his heart – seeing us struggle and yet not reach out to him. Seeing us turn a deaf ear to the care and compassion he sends our way. Seeing us refuse the help that's offered us, because this is our battle, we've been brought up to sink or swim on our own, to row the boat as fast as we can, as if our life depends on it, to hunker down all alone and wait for the storm to pass. So sad, when all we have to do is reach out for Jesus.

When the disciples were standing strong against the storm, “immediately,” says Matthew, “Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’”

And Peter answered him, saying, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus said, “Come.” So Peter “got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus.”

Why would Peter get out of the boat?!? The boat is the place of safety. The boat is what's holding him up. The boat is where all his friends are. The boat is the only thing between him and a miserable death drowning at sea. The boat is a metaphor for the church. Why would Peter get out of the boat?

Jesus allows us to get out of the boat if that's what we want – the boat that is the community of faith, the church. But why would anyone want to get out of the boat and face the elements all alone, sinking into a cold, uncaring sea of black and dangerous water – no light of Christ to guide and protect? So sad.

And yet we see it all time. People leave the boat, leave the church, to go it all alone in this world, without the loving guidance and support that Jesus offers through who we are as the community of faith.

And still, when Peter gets out of the boat and begins to sink – when we like Peter are adrift in this dangerous, uncertain world – still Jesus is there for us.

Even if we don't always recognize him, Jesus is there for us. Even if we've left him on the shore behind us, Jesus is there for us. Even if we've decided to fight our own battles, to sink or swim on our own, to get out of the boat – leaving the love and support of the family of faith – Jesus is there for us. Even if we've let ourselves drift aimless through life – through the rough, unpredictable seas of life – Jesus is there for us.

Jesus, reaching out to Peter, catching him by the hand, Jesus says to Peter – and to us – “You of little faith, why did you doubt – why did you get out of the boat?” And he brings us back in. And the winds cease. And we and all the faithful gather together and worship him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” Thanks be to God, for Jesus, and thanks be to Jesus for this church. Amen.

## PASTORAL PRAYER

God of grace, we come to this place of prayer from different paths on our journey as your servants. Some of us struggle with doubt and loss as we question your presence in the midst of our pain and the pain of those we love.

Grant these the patience to let your love seep into the brokenness.

Some of us come before you with uncertainties about what we believe, what you would have us do with our lives and how we might serve you.

Grant these the willingness to honestly doubt, so that the question of faith and servanthood might be honestly answered rather than just accepted.

Some of us come before you with a joy that knows no bounds in the celebration of love and the fulfillment of dreams. Grant these the grace to share their joy with others, even as we lift up prayers of thanksgiving for the joy of Tim Barker having another grandchild on the way.

We rejoice with those celebrating the happy milestones of life. We pray also for those recovering from illness, injury and disease. And in our prayer, we acknowledge that we are all on the same road, united in our efforts to be your people – a people with a mission to bring your love to the world through the one in whose footsteps we strive to follow, Christ our Lord, who taught us to say when we pray ...

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**