

Rhythms of Faith

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Third Presbyterian Church
Matthew 14:22-33
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Twenty-five years ago this coming Wednesday, I was ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It seems hardly possible, but it's true. Though I was called to serve a church in Chicago Presbytery, the ordination service took place in the Presbytery of Muskingum Valley. I am sure you all know exactly where that is, but I will tell you anyway – it's the presbytery in which the College of Wooster is located. When I went to Wooster I joined a Presbyterian church there, and so went through the ordination process there as well.

I was ordained in McGaw Chapel on the college's campus. My father preached the sermon and other friends participated. Bonny was there, though we weren't yet married. Who knows what she was thinking at that moment, except something like "what on earth am I getting myself into!?" It remains a fair question.

I am grateful for these twenty-five years. Not a day of one of them has felt like a burden, and every day of every one of them has been a gift. I am grateful for colleagues along the way, and for a dear family whose support has been unwavering, even in wavering moments. I don't remember that ordination service like it was yesterday, but it certainly doesn't seem like two and a half decades ago, which would seem to be a sign of deep grace for which I am grateful indeed.

This summer a group of our youth travelled to Montreat, North Carolina for a youth conference. It was a terrific experience. They worshiped, studied, prayed, connected, played. Their experience was echoed on dozens and dozens of Facebook posts I read over the summer, with youth conferences happening everywhere and youth and adults having mountaintop spiritual experiences.

Just two weeks ago, we visited Hyde Park, New York, and the FDR Presidential museum. We saw videos and other images of his first election, in 1932. For the first time ever, a party nominee showed up at the nominating convention, so there Roosevelt was, in Chicago, speaking to the ecstatic gathering, cheering wildly, ready to propel him to victory just months later.

Yesterday, and on Saturdays throughout the summer, couples are getting married. Months, and even years, bucket loads of expectations, gowns, tuxes, the whole works, are all coming

together. In fact, if you want a fun exercise, pick a summer Saturday or one in early fall and drive up and down East Avenue, counting the weddings, admiring the fancy cars, appreciating the fashion choices, or questioning them very-so-often (though none here!).

Ordinations, conferences, elections, weddings. All high energy, high emotion, high hope moments, mountaintop experiences, filled with planning, expectations heaped on them, laden with future possibilities.

And the next day – ministry begins, or youth come down and go back home, or a politician actually has to govern, or a couple asks the question of what it will mean to live together for the rest of our lives.

Mountaintop experiences followed quickly by the ordinary, the if-not-quite-mundane then at least the normal and average and typical. Every day can't be a mountaintop day. It is not sustainable, and more so, it is not real life.

I often tell couples preparing to be married to invest more energy and time and money in the day after the wedding than the day of. It's a better long-term investment, and the same would seem to be true for life itself.

Go to those conferences! Get ordained! Have a big and happy and epic event! But remember that next day, and the day to come, and that life is about how we live in the ordinary moments.

So how do we? How do we live those moments?

W. H. Auden writes about the days following Christmas:

“Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes --
Some have got broken -- and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week –

There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance...”

Kathleen Norris echoes the notion that not only are mountaintop experiences unsustainable, but that when we come down from the mountain and live in the everyday, we find moments of grace and purpose and significance.

“The ordinary activities I find most compatible with contemplation are walking, baking bread, and doing laundry. ...Laundry, liturgy and women's work all serve to ground us in the world, and they need not grind us down. Our daily tasks, whether we perceive them as drudgery or essential, life-supporting work, do not define who we are as women or as human beings.”
(*The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and Women's Work*)

There are two questions for us this morning, at least, having to do with faith and living in the world. The first has to do with how we replenish our faith, rejuvenate and restore, how do we find faith to persevere, when the going gets tough, to be sure, but also when it gets tedious, or routine, or average and ordinary.

The second has to do with where we turn when faith seems inadequate, not up to the task.

Last week I told you that the gospel lesson for that day had been one we considered for the five minute General Assembly speech. So was, in fact, today's. When we went looking for stories whereby the disciples, the church, had little faith and little hope and Jesus responded by defying and transforming expectations, we found a bunch, and this is one of them.

John the Baptist dies and Jesus tries to get away. The crowds won't let him. He finally does. He goes on a retreat, alone, to pray. This is a profound, gospel reminder of the importance of Sabbath, vacation, time away. We are called to replenish and rejuvenate, compelled to do it, to disengage in order to reengage. Jesus does it all the time – so should we.

Then Jesus reengages to deal with crisis. In this case, the boat in which the disciples are traveling is sinking. Wind and waves are strong. And Jesus walks toward them to calm them, to calm the waters. It doesn't work.

In the parlance, they freak out and he responds with a central gospel command – do not be afraid. They calm down, the waters calm down. All is good.

And Peter, as a stand-in for all of them and all of us, decides he'd like to test his faith and give it a try. He steps out, but the wind kicks up and he becomes frightened and begins to sink. He cries out, Jesus takes his hand and all is well again, as the winds cease.

Our faith ebbs and flows. As we are human, that is only natural. The two responses this morning to those moments when our faith ebbs are available to us even now.

Like Jesus, we retreat when we need to. People often ask me why I go to church when I am on vacation. I do so because as much as I am able to worship here on a Sunday morning through prayers and music and the strength of the gathered community, I, too, need replenishment. And one place I get it is by visiting other places on a Sunday morning. It's not exactly the same as a mountaintop retreat, but it provides moments, for me often during the prelude and the

prayers, when I can disengage to reengage. That's what Jesus does. That's what we do. We are human and therefore not production machines, so whether it's a morning or evening walk, meditation, getting up from your desk every so often, or, in this season, actually going someplace far away and totally different, here it is. We need replenishment and rejuvenation, and if it's good enough for Jesus it's good enough for us.

And then we reengage. And while grace is all sufficient, faith is never meant to be a solo act. We need the support and nurture of community. And there are moments when we need to remind ourselves that it is not about us.

Peter does it for us. Save us, he cries out. Save us, we cry out. And Jesus reaches out his hand to us, and if we are wise enough and open enough we reach out in response, whether we are seeking to offer support to someone else or to navigate on our journey of faith and life. Jesus initiates by reaching out and our response is simply to accept that hand. And the winds will calm down. And we will be OK.

But we need to do those two things. We need to disengage to reengage, to retreat in order to act. And we need to recognize our weakness and need when it is real.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that "Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith."

If we trust God, we will look inward to renew our own faith. And if we trust God, we will reach out to Jesus who is already reaching out to us. Faith renewed and faith strengthened, that we might serve God and serve God's world in calm sea or rough, in the peaks *and* valleys of life. Amen.