

## Jesus Calls

Before we get into the boat today to travel with the disciples out onto the sea of Galilee, we should note what we're bringing aboard with us. How you hear any story from the Gospels depends a lot on the baggage you bring with you.

For instance, I am no sailor. I learned this the hard way when I was a young pastor in Virginia. My presbytery executive was an avid sailor, and invited me to go sailing with him and a couple of other pastors. We left right after Easter and were gone several nights, sailing on the Chesapeake Bay.

What my skipper didn't tell me was how unpredictable the Chesapeake Bay can be in early spring. Or how cold. Or how stormy. We were out in the middle of the bay when a squall came up out of nowhere. "The perfect squall," you might say. The boat rode up and down in the swells while I lost my lunch, clung to the lifeline, and prayed that my body would be recovered so that my widow would have something to bury.

"Why don't you go below?" the skipper suggested. (That's sailor talk for, "My, that's a peculiar shade of green." Or perhaps "Get out of my sight, you miserable landlubber. You're spoiling the fun.")

I did. It was worse down there. I considered going back on deck and throwing myself overboard, but I didn't have the strength.

So, before I get in that boat with the disciples, I'm loading up on Dramamine and making sure I have my Coastguard-approved life preserver strapped tight around me.

What about you? What baggage are you bringing to this story? Perhaps you grew up singing a hymn that went something like:

Jesus calls us; o're the tumult  
Of our life's wild, restless sea.  
Day by day his sweet voice soundeth,  
Saying "Christian, follow me."

If so, you are prepared for some rough going, and won't be surprised by what is about to happen.

But the disciples in Matthew's story don't have the advantage of having sung that grand old hymn. This is all new to them – this business of following Jesus. And they don't have their Dramamine or their life jackets, either. They're out on that surging sea, and have been rowing against the wind all night long, and my guess is, they're tired, they're hungry, and they're fed up taking orders from Jesus.

Jesus is the one who told them to go out there in the first place, remember? Just after he fed the multitude, he told the disciples to go ahead to the other side of the lake. He'd be along directly. He dismissed the crowds, went up on the mountain to pray, and seems to have forgotten all about the disciples in the boat, bobbing up and down like a bottle cork all night.

"Where do you suppose he is?"

"How should I know? Just keep rowing."

"Do you think he's up on that mountain praying again?"

"Probably. Did anybody bring any loaves and fishes from the picnic?"

"I thought Andrew brought them."

"You said you'd bring them, James."

"Did not!"

"Did so!"

"Pipe down back there! You're rocking the boat."

I think Matthew wants us to think of this boat in his story as the church of Jesus Christ – smelly, leaky, and doing its best to head in the right direction, but propelled erratically by people grown tired of one other's company.

Now, if Jesus were there in the boat with them, they wouldn't be talking like this to each other. They'd be encouraging one another, I imagine.

"Come on, Andrew. We've seen worse storms than this, haven't we?"

"John, why don't you give Levi a hand. He's used to office work. Rowing isn't really his thing."

That's how it might have been if Jesus had been in the boat – everybody pulling together. But he wasn't. It's awfully hard to be the church without Jesus.

A lot of people are worried about the church right now. Worried that it isn't gaining members as it should. Worried that its worship services aren't cutting edge. Worried that if it gets too political, the whole shooting match will sink to bottom like the Titanic.

I have to say, those things don't worry me half so much as the feeling I get from some that Jesus himself is not welcome aboard.

A few years ago, I spent a week serving as a chaplain in a course for girl choristers run by the Royal School of Church Music in America. I thought I'd be taking it easy, working on my vowels, polishing my semiquavers – that kind of thing. No! They had me preaching the gospel twice a day -- morning and night. In less than a week I preached nine sermons. Toward the end of the course, the Music Director, who serves a large congregation in New Jersey, said to me, "I've heard the name of Jesus mentioned more often in this one week than I have heard his name in the worship of my home church in the past year."

"You see, in my church we don't talk much about Jesus. We're too sophisticated, too urbane. Mostly we walk on eggshells, trying to be nice to one another. To tell you the truth, I think most people in my church, especially the clergy, find Jesus a little embarrassing."

It's hard to be the church without Jesus.

And so, the disciples are floundering – working hard but getting nowhere. And who should approach them but Jesus himself? Or is it Jesus? Might be a ghost, you know. The sea is a good place for ghosts. So is the church. The ghost of the previous pastor. The ghost of old scandals. The ghost who haunts the Session room wailing, "We've never done it this way before."

Might not be Jesus. It might be a ghost.

**"Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid!"**

Well, it *sounds* like him, but how can we be sure?

Good old Peter has the perfect litmus test. **“Lord, if it’s you, command me to come to you on the water.”**

That detail in this story used to bother me. I couldn’t figure out why Peter didn’t just jump out of the boat and start walking. It is William Willimon who helped me to see that the question at this juncture in the story is not Peter’s faith, but Jesus’ identity.

How do you tell it’s Jesus who’s calling? How does the church distinguish his voice from all the others clamoring for our attention? How do we know it’s Jesus and not some apparition calling to us in the fog?

Well, Peter has the right idea. If he’s calling us to take a risk, chances are, it’s Jesus.

My first college roommate was named Dale. I won’t tell you his last name because these sermons are posted on the internet and I don’t want to get sued. Dale had a twin brother who looked just like him, but Dale was easy to identify. He was the guy who’d hand you a glass at a party and say, “Here! Drink this! You’ll love it.”

“What’s in it?”

“Never mind. You’ll love it.” That was Dale.

Or in a car: “Let’s see how fast this baby will go. Wonder if she’ll break a hundred.” That was Dale.

Or at the top of a cliff. “Let’s jump. Couldn’t be more than 50 or 60 feet. Should be fun. One, two, three . . .” That was Dale.

One weekend Dale went camping with some friends. Without asking for permission, he took my heavy wool blanket with him – the one with my high school football letter sewn on it. It came back with huge holes burned through it.

“What happened?”

“Campfire got a little out of hand.” That was Dale.

*If he commands me to get out of this boat and come to him across the water, it can’t be anyone else, Peter reasons. It’s got to be Jesus.*

Who else? Who else, in the circumstances, would call his followers to stop rowing and go for a walk? Who else would ask what is humanly impossible? Who else would bid us, “*Give to the wind your fears. Stop counting heads. Stop devising strategic plans. Come, join me over forty fathoms*”?

Couldn't be anybody else. Has to be Jesus.

Times were tense in Tallahassee back then. The bus boycott was a recent and painful memory. Blacks were still not welcome in most white churches. But some meddlesome folks at a certain downtown church – most of them women – decided it was time for Tallahassee's first racially integrated preschool.

They drove their cars into Frenchtown. They knocked on doors. They said to African-American parents who not long before wouldn't have dared to come through the front door of a white church, “Won't you send your child to our new preschool? We'll come and pick her up. Our school won't be complete without your child.”

Who do you suppose asked those otherwise sensible church ladies to do a thing like that? I think we know. And what might that same voice be telling us about the events in Charlottesville this weekend?

A lot of people have been telling Pam McVety to give up trying to convince Presbyterians to shift their investments from fossil fuel companies to companies that are serious about combatting climate change.

“You make people feel uncomfortable,” she has been told. “Even the President thinks climate change is a hoax. Besides, Presbyterians have enough on their plate right now without having folks like you remind them that financial stewardship means putting your money where your faith is. Give it a rest. Don't rock the boat.”

But Pam hasn't stopped. Whom do you think she's listening to?

Is that you, Lord? Is that you, or is it some imposter pretending to speak for you? Someone with a formula for success. Someone who insists we hunker down and play it safe. Someone who looks and sounds like he should be the head of some kind of church, but whose gospel is not good news for the whole world.

How we hear this story from Matthew's Gospel depends a lot on the baggage we bring aboard and the baggage we're willing to throw overboard. I don't know for certain what Matthew might be saying to the church today, but I'm sure he was saying this much to the church of his day: If the voice we hear is telling us to sit tight, brothers and sisters, if he's telling us to play it safe, if he's telling us to put our welfare above everyone else's, it's not Jesus.

Without Jesus, brothers and sisters, we're sunk. With Jesus, there's no telling where we'll be headed, but we'll still be afloat, and most important of all, we'll be the church of Jesus Christ.