

Pentecost 10 August 9, 2020 Psalm 105:1-6, Romans 10:5-17, Matthew 14:22-33

Having heard John the Baptist has been executed by Herod, Jesus gathers his disciples and heads to the wilderness to pray. But people see Jesus leaving town by boat, and walk ahead to where he's going. When Jesus arrives the crowds are already there waiting. Jesus heals the sick all day. As day is ending, he multiplies loaves and fishes and feeds more than five thousand people... Finally dismissing crowds with a blessing, he sends his disciples off in the boat, and settles down, alone at last, to catch up on prayer time...

Then, very early in the morning, his spiritual batteries recharged, Jesus comes walking on the water... He's noticed disciples are caught in a storm out on the lake... Rowing against the wind, not moving forward, still far from land.

His disciples, understandably, are terrified when they see Jesus walking on the water through the storm... *'Take heart, don't be afraid, it's me'* Jesus tells them. Peter says *'Lord if it's you, command me to come to you on the water.'* Peter, notoriously impetuous, is famous for blurting things out without thinking things through, and speaking before anyone else dares speak. Often boldest of the disciples – but – asking to walk on water!?! – (wow!) – now we're talking above-and-beyond-bold-audacity.

But Jesus gives the go-ahead. And Peter's doing it – walking on water towards Jesus.. (Not something they taught us in seminary –) But here's Peter – walking on the water...

Till he notices...The storm hasn't stopped. The winds are still howling. Big waves are still rolling around him... And as the reality of what he's doing starts to sink in... Peter starts sinking too...

Thankfully, he knows to call on Jesus – who puts out his hand immediately – and as they get in the boat together, the storm is done.

This is a miracle story of course. But I'm pretty sure walking on water isn't the main point. We never hear Jesus give disciples lessons on how to walk on water. Doing that is entirely Peter's idea. Well – he did see Jesus doing it – he does want to learn from Jesus. And Jesus invites him to give it a try when Peter requests – and doesn't scold Peter for asking to do something outrageous. But

Jesus also doesn't say 'keep trying, you'll get the hang of it...' I don't think walking on water is the main point... and...

I don't think the main point is even about not being afraid when the storms of life are raging. Not being afraid is usually a good idea. Jesus tells us 'don't be afraid' many times... Always a lesson to keep learning... But...

Notice Jesus doesn't scold Peter for being afraid – only for suspending faith while doing something miraculously amazing...

So I'm hearing Jesus mostly telling us today not to disbelieve that we can do anything Jesus invites us to do. Including miracles we may already be doing.

Last week our family watched *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, a movie based on a true story of a cynical magazine writer assigned to write about Mr. Rogers, star of the long-running children's tv show. The real life writer Tom Junod, had a reputation as a very cynical investigative reporter. Some people refused to be interviewed by him. But Fred Rogers, who was an ordained Presbyterian minister, and the same person in real life that we saw on tv as Mr Rogers – goes out of his way to make friends with many people others would rather not be friends with. (In life, as on television.)

Mr Rogers asks Tom, the writer (called Lloyd in the movie) if he ever had a special friend as a child. A stuffed animal. And it takes awhile, but the cynical reporter gradually opens up with Mr Rogers, talks about his old beat-up-raggedy beloved 'Old Rabbit,' his childhood stuffed-animal friend.

He watches Mr Rogers interact with children on and off camera – many of whom believe Mr Rogers walks on water. We see Rogers talking with children who have been withdrawn, depressed, almost giving up on life. We see these children opening up, again and again, in the presence of this man who tells them he loves them just as they are... and demonstrates this by listening to them patiently, gently, sensitively, every day. Teaching love for every neighbor...by word and example.

There's a scene in which a little boy is silent, sullen and angry, clutching a long plastic weapon, banging it on the ground, when he's spoken to. His mother keeps urging him to stop but he won't. Mr. Rogers asks the boy 'can I whisper a secret to you?... The boy nods. Mr Rogers whispers. The boy hugs him. Later, we learn what he said to the boy was 'you are strong inside, too.'

One of my favorite scenes has Mr Rogers riding in a NY city subway full of

children going home after school, with a few adults including several police officers riding along, some sitting some standing. Kids notice Mr Rogers, exchange glances – can this really be him? One starts singing ‘*Won’t you be my neighbor?*’ the song Rogers sang at the beginning of every morning show. Immediately the whole car, kids and cops and grown ups, join in singing together... *Won’t you be my neighbor?*

That’s the kind of miracle... I think Jesus would like to see us doing...

Early last week our Bishop, Suda Devadhar sent out an email letter to everyone on his list... (and anyone who ever wants to can be on our bishop’s list)... He talked about *They Also Serve*, by Jane Ives, wife of retired Bishop Cliff Ives. A book about spouses and families of pastors and bishops, whose ministries are usually less obvious than those of their officially appointed to Methodist ministry spouses, but no less important. She quotes the wife of another retired Methodist bishop, who, with her husband, was part of a group of Methodists that spent time with Mother Teresa and her nuns working among the poor in urban India. Mother Teresa told the group she hoped they would come back and spend a week or two in ministry with her. And to the bishop she said with a smile, “And because you are a *bishop* – *you* can do the laundry.”

Bishop Suda picked up on Mother Teresa’s remark, and wrote about how all the ways doing the laundry, literally and metaphorically – doing the little un-glamorous tasks most people never notice – is often more important than the supposedly big things bishops and pastors do. A lot of people thought Mother Teresa walked on water – but she would always say her whole life and ministry was about doing very small things every day for Jesus. Doing the laundry by hand for the destitute and dying – because it was also for Jesus.

So too for us – doing chores we’d rather not do... for someone who is tired or hurting. Doing many little things every day in love – is what makes us recognizable as people who walk with Jesus... Doing the laundry and other little things for others... is a kind of miracle... that Jesus loves to see us doing...

In his 1998 Esquire magazine article that the movie is based on, Tom Junod mentions a Kentucky teenager who told his classmates ‘tomorrow I’m going to do something “really big” in school.’ Next day he shot 8 classmates gathered in a prayer group...

Junod wrote: “*when Mister Rogers heard about (this), he said, "Oh, wouldn't the world be a different place if he had said, 'I'm going to do something really little tomorrow," – and he decided to dedicate a week of the Neighborhood to the theme "Little and Big." He wanted to tell children that what starts out little can sometimes become big, – and...that (they) could devote themselves to little dreams without feeling bad about them...*”

Mr Rogers and Mother Teresa were very different people with very different life experiences and personalities. What they shared in common was love for God and love for people. I’m not sure St Teresa ever got angry...

But when Tom, the formerly very cynical journalist (in real life and in the movie) asks Mr Rogers if he ever gets angry, Rogers answers ‘When I feel angry... I’ve learned there are some things I can do that help me with my feelings... I can pound the lowest keys on the piano. Really loud. (He demonstrates – bonk! bonk! bonk!) I do that sometimes...’

‘I swim every day... as fast as I can...I pray. I read the bible. I pray for many people every day.’ (‘All of these practices help.’)

The journalist also notices... Mr Rogers has a habit of asking people to pray for him. Especially children and others who are hurting. After seeing this happen once, the journalist remarks how insightful Rogers is – to understand how much it helps the self-esteem of a troubled or hurting child to be asked to pray for Mr Rogers, their hero. Mr Rogers asking them to pray for him seems like a bigger miracle than walking on water to some children. But Mr Rogers tells the journalist, ‘I’m not so wise, and that’s not my motivation. I just believe anyone who has been through as much hurt and difficulty as this child has to be very close to God. I crave that child’s prayers for myself.’

And I think there’s more than one miracle here...Jesus likes to see us doing.

I’ve noticed this week as I’ve read our gospel – four words or their synonyms – that repeat three times each. Repetition which I’m hearing as things Jesus underlines to help us remember... First –

Wind – strong stormy wind – is a word we hear three times. Stormy winds keep disciples in the boat struggling far from shore. Stormy winds cause Peter to be stricken with fear. Stormy wind reminds us – storms and struggles are part

of life on earth. And it's only the presence of Jesus that causes stormy winds to be still...

Afraid – terrified – frightened is another set of closely related words we hear three times – describing the disciples and Peter. Again, only calling on Jesus calms our fears... as we reach out to him...

Immediately is the word our gospel reading begins with – *immediately* Jesus sends people away so he can pray... *Immediately* Jesus speaks to disciples when they cry out in fear. *Immediately* Jesus reaches out his hand to Peter when he starts to sink and cries for help... Reminding us there's no time but now. Now – immediately – is the time – to look to Jesus – call on Jesus – walk to Jesus...

And walking – *walking on the sea – walking on water*, is the other phrase we hear three times. Jesus walks on the sea. Peter too. So maybe the story *is* about walking on water after all. Not so much literally, but doing whatever we see Jesus doing – doing our best to do that too. Without doubting while doing.

Today's reading, like most of the gospel, is a parable, not a magic wand to be waved as a talisman against all harm. Remembering –

Mr Rogers helped millions of children have a better childhood... He couldn't insulate children from all the pain and hurt of the world. But he gave children hope and tools for living, and a legacy we can still look to and borrow from, in our lives...

Mother Teresa helped millions of poor people with meals, shelter, and most of all loving hands and hearts for the dying and the living... She couldn't stop people from dying or prevent poverty. But her ministries of love and mercy continue through the order she founded and the example she gave us...

Jesus suffered and died on a cross. And the Lord of the universe still suffers at the hands of the rulers of this world as he takes on the pain of the hurting ones throughout creation. Jesus does not resolve our every struggle, hurt and difficulty. But he gives us life, joy, and peace as we live by his word... Life without end that can never be taken away from us...

By his word, we have life. In his life we have love. By his grace day by day we can walk with him. Inviting all to be our neighbor. Inviting every neighborhood to be God's neighborhood.

Thanks be to God. Amen.