

***“Takin’ A Chance On God”***  
**Matthew 14:22-33**  
**October 16, 2011**

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**First Christian Church**  
**18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost**

With all the attention Simon Peter gets in today’s text, the ones I really wonder about are the rest of the disciples who never got out of the boat and never experienced the thrill Peter must’ve had in those brief Camelot moments of walking on water. What went through their minds?

Matthew gives us a clue. He says, *“They were terrified, crying out in fear, “It’s a ghost!”* as Jesus walks toward them in the middle of the night.

Yet, as flawed as Peter often proved to be: like denying 3 times, Peter showed real courage in stepping out of the boat. And this is what set Peter apart from the other disciples. Peter’s courage led him to experience, if only for a glorious instant, a rush of exhilaration actually walking on the water. But the other disciples missed experiencing the miracle for themselves because they were too afraid to get out of the boat!

Henry David Thoreau once wrote, “Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.” It’s sad but true. While we admire those who risk everything for their faith, few if any of us, count ourselves among them. We love to hear stories of people like Peter who take a leap of faith, but these are always *their* stories, *not* ours. We’re more like the other disciples, huddled anxiously inside the boat, waiting for the next wave to break over us and maybe even drown us.

God knows churches are sailing in “a perfect storm” these days. It isn’t just shrinking attendance caused by the loss of so many from the WWII generation. It’s the worst economy since the Great Depression. It’s the passing of our seniors who, for decades, have kept churches going by their giving. It’s the worry the middle-aged have about making it to retirement and having enough money to retire on. It’s the aversion young adults have toward institutions of all kinds, including the church, while saddled with exorbitant child-care costs and college debt. It’s those who gave generously in their lifetimes but who forgot to remember the church in their wills.

The question Matthew’s story poses for us is this: Will we continue to live lives of quiet desperation, shivering anxiously in the face of today’s financial challenges? Or will we dare to be like Peter and take that leap of faith and give as generously as we’d really like to give? You see, I don’t

think any of us wants to be slaves to our fears. Yet I think we're afraid that if we really try to be faithful we'll end up broke, sinking like Peter, but with no one to save us!

While we're faced with this dilemma every stewardship season this is especially true this year. We're not just in a perfect financial storm. We're also at a pivotal moment in this church's life. The faith or fear with which we face this pivotal moment will make all the difference in whether this church can continue to be the kind of church we want it to be.

Not to say there aren't many good things happening here. There are! Like René, I believe this church is on the cusp of a new surge in growth numerically and spiritually, especially regarding our ministry to and with young adults! For years, young adults have composed our largest number of visitors *and new members*. Josh has reignited the Visionaries Class not only on Sunday mornings but also for fellowship and service on other occasions. Thirteen Visionaries served dinner 3 weeks ago for CrossOver Prison Ministries. The number of new babies has increased significantly the past 2 years. Next month we'll celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of FaithPoint, originally designed to reach more young adults. It's now often our best attended service!

What makes this moment, this stewardship season so pivotal, is that we dare not let this opportunity pass for greater growth in ministry, unless we're ready to accept the consequences. Unless the church is faithful in doing everything it can to meet its financial challenges, there's no guarantee the church will be able to continue to afford 2 full-time clergy. The very vision of becoming a multi-generational congregation could be threatened.

And why? Because, like the other disciples, we may be tempted to play it safe, to stay in the boat, to hold too tightly to our resources, and to consign ourselves, if not the church, to lives of quiet desperation! This isn't a challenge that can be postponed. It must be acted upon here and now, as we make our pledges for 2012 next week!

So, how will we meet the challenge?

First, we don't have to deny our fears any more than we have to cave in to them. As someone once wisely said, "Courage is fear which has said its prayers." We all need to be people of prayer. Our prayer needs to be the Serenity Prayer: "Lord, grant me the courage to change the things I can."

Second, we need to remember, as 2 Timothy 1 says, “*God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*” To paraphrase 2 Timothy: “*God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of holy boldness.*” We’re called to courage, not cowardice; lives of power, not helplessness.

Third, we need to remember God is always faithful. As Peter sinks and cries for help, Jesus takes his hand and saves him. Our faith is based upon knowing Christ is ultimately trustworthy & will catch us when we fall.

Fourth, we need to recognize that God is willing to be tested by us. Listen to the prophet Malachi, speaking on behalf of God, to the Jewish priests, who got in the habit of shorting the offerings, and to the people who were willing to let them get away with it:

*Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, “How are we robbing you? In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing!”*

“**PUT ME TO THE TEST!**” God says. “Take a chance on me! Stop riding the fence and trying to be respectably Christian on the outside and in utter spiritual turmoil on the inside! Dream big! Dream my dream, and act on it! Stop trying to serve both me and money. It can’t be done. Take the risk of faith! Put me to the test! Get out of the boat!” And then “*I will open the windows of heaven and pour down for you an overflowing blessing!*”

Sure, taking a chance isn’t easy. Even Peter was scared at first, asking with a dubious tone in his voice whether it was really Jesus walking toward him. As he began to sink, he probably wished he’d never left the boat.

While jumping out of the boat myself, I have found myself wanting to jump back in, where I often think it’d be safer. I can’t count the number of times I’ve second-guessed myself about my decision to leave this church and my discernment of what I believe God wants for you. Throughout this torturous process of deciding to move on I keep hearing God repeat one message over and over: namely, that if the church is to fulfill its vision, I have to be like John the Baptist and prepare the way for a young associate.

Mind you, I never heard God say, “Everything will be hunky-dory for you, Rick;” though receiving a call from the Yankton church certainly provided plenty of relief and some assurance that leaving here is the right thing to do.

Frankly, the longer I’ve lived with this decision the better I have felt about my faith. I regard this decision—my risk in stepping out of the boat—as 1 of the 2 most significant acts of faith in my life. The other was moving our family, including a, then, 6-year old daughter and less than 3-month old son to Kansas City to restart a failing new church, knowing good and well I’d need a 2<sup>nd</sup> job to support our family and had no immediate prospects.

Oh sure, I wish the church could afford a 3<sup>rd</sup> full-time position. I also wish my leaving would by itself ensure a balanced budget here for 2012. But neither of these is true. I know it and you know it.

And so I go: not out of any sense of unhappiness with you, but because I love you. I refuse to get in the way of the bright future God has in store for this church. This is why anyone threatening to leave because I leave is missing the whole reason I’m leaving: because I care about this church and believe my leaving can help lead to a better future for this congregation.

Yes, there are still moments I’m scared spit-less about making this change and leaving René behind and turning our lives upside down. But I’m also finding a certain elation in jumping out of the boat at a time in life when lots of 63-1/2 year olds are starting to row toward the safety of the shore.

At the same time I know I don’t want René and me to make this sacrifice alone. I don’t suffer a martyr-complex. I want to know you are willing to make a sacrifice too by stretching yourselves to underwrite a 2012 budget that includes a full-time associate. I want to know we are truly partners in this adventure and that while my boat sails elsewhere, we are all sailing in faith.

This is why I pose this question: Have you ever taken a leap of faith like Simon Peter? Have you ever laid much on the line for your faith, so that if your act of faith became public no one would mistake you for anything but being a Christian?

If your answer is “No!”, if you’ve only been willing to be complacent and look for safety, then I invite you to take that step, take a chance on God, and test and believe God will be there for you. Let your fear say its prayers

and turn into courage. Because in the end, this is all any of us has: Christ's invitation "Come!" and prayer and Christ's hand to rescue us.

Our pledges will tell the story. They will prove if we are willing to step out of the boat in faith or whether we were merely satisfied to go along for the ride. Experience tells me there's only one right thing to do and by now you know precisely what it is.