

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL WALK (Matthew 14:22-36)

8.15.21

INTRODUCTION

A couple of jobs ago, I worked at a youth shelter (boys' section) that was part of the Dakota County judicial system. These were teen boys who had gotten into some level of trouble and were being held in the shelter pending disposition of their cases. A lot of these kids had had very little home life, and not a lot of education.

One night, in their down time before going to bed, I thought it might be fun to show them some "Road Runner" cartoons. After the Three Stooges, "Road Runner" cartoons were my favorite thing to watch growing up. Anyway, the boys loved them. In one of the cartoons I showed, our hero, the Road Runner, was being chased by good ol' Wile E. Coyote when suddenly Mr. Coyote was engulfed in the dust cloud stirred up by the Road Runner's great speed. He couldn't see anything, so he stopped. But as he came to a stop, he suddenly began to suspect that he wasn't on solid ground anymore but, instead, he was in mid-air, having run off of a cliff. He looked around and saw the Road Runner staring at him while standing safely — on solid ground. Then the coyote looked down and, realizing that hanging in mid-air was impossible, began his plunge to the canyon floor below.

As they were watching the coyote standing helplessly in mid-air, a couple of the boys called out, "He can't do that!" "Guys," I said, "it's a cartoon." But they obviously understood enough to understand one of the most basic realities of nature: gravity.

Today we're going to be looking at a moment in the ministry of our "Radical Rabbi" where the realities of nature definitely come into play. So, as we head off into this moment, **let's begin with a word of prayer.**

TEXT (Matthew 14:22-33)

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to the other side, while He dismissed the crowd — Matthew 14:22.

Now, in the context of the moment, this is all happening right after the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 — a story we hit last week. But why did Matthew, as he began talking about this moment, start his narrative with the word, "Immediately?" For that matter, Mark did the same thing. The Greek tells us that, in our words today, that Jesus moved the disciples along ASAP; in other words, "Guys, into the boat. Do it now!" OK, but why the urgency? What was going on?

John in his gospel gives us the answer: ***After the people saw the sign Jesus performed (the feeding of that massive crowd from five small loaves and two fishes), they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world" — John 6:14.***

The "prophet" they are referring to is the one prophesied some 14-1500 years before, when Moses said this to the people of Israel: ***"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to Him" — Moses, Deuteronomy 18:15.*** People were already trying to get a handle on Jesus, so

the questions about who this guy might be had already been percolating for a while, much to the distress of the scribes and Pharisees.

But there's more to this moment than their questions. Remember from last week that John told us that this "sign," this miracle, occurred just prior to the Jewish Passover Festival. That annual celebration had become a great conduit for the ongoing nationalism that had been present — and growing — ever since Rome took control of Palestine some 80 years before. If this guy was supposed to be like Moses — who took Israel out of over 400 years of bondage in Egypt — perhaps this guy, if he's our "Moses," will lead us out of our bondage to Rome.

But as flattering to somebody as that might be, it was a danger signal to Jesus that the crowds felt this way. Was He a king? Without question. Was He here to establish a kingdom? Absolutely; He had mentioned that several times. But it was never meant to be an earthly kingdom, a return to the glory days of David and Solomon that most restless Jews longed for — and mistakenly assumed the "Messiah" to be. This was a heavenly kingdom, a kingdom of God and not of men. All this desire to make this Radical Rabbi their earthly king — even by force, if necessary — simply told Christ that their hopes and dreams remained anchored to the flesh-and-blood realities of life in this world, not in the life of the kingdom which He had been proclaiming.

So, Jesus wanted to get the disciples out of there as quickly as possible because He didn't want them getting caught up in that wrongminded, nationalistic fervor that was misrepresenting the whole idea of God's Messiah so badly. By the things they did and the things they said, it appears safe to say that the disciples were not completely sold on who Jesus was either — or on exactly what kind of a kingdom He was promoting. Something had to be done — and quickly — and Christ does it.

And John finishes this part of the story: ***Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make Him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by Himself — John 6:15.***

So, He got the disciples in their boat making their way from the east side of the Sea of Galilee to the west, Jesus withdrawing from the area (and the crowds) to get off by Himself, and the crowds, finally, somehow, dismissed by Christ, heading back to wherever they had come from.

After He had dismissed them, He went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray. Later that night, He was there alone — Matthew 14:23.

I love how often the gospels relate that Jesus prayed. He talked with His Father — about everything. This happened all the time; in fact, Luke tells us that: ***Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed — Luke 5:16.*** This was one such time. You see, Jesus wanted to ensure that, as the only reason He was here was, as He said: to ***"not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me"*** — ***Jesus Christ, John 6:38b***, that He was completely connected and aware of His Father's will and intentions at all times.

Meanwhile, back with the disciples, their ***boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it — Matthew 14:24.***

Now Mark confirms that, at this time, *the boat was in the middle of the lake* — **Mark 6:47a**, and John even gives us specifics, telling us that the disciples *had rowed about three or four miles* — **John 6:19a**; we know that the Sea of Galilee is roughly eight miles across at its widest point, thus both accounts supporting Matthew’s description of their being a considerable distance from land. And being in the middle of the lake suggests that they were trying to cross “Main Street,” so to speak — that middle part of the lake that would have left them most exposed and at risk of the high winds and treacherous waves that could have so quickly been sprung upon them — and John’s gospel certainly confirms what Matthew says in describing their being “buffeted by the waves” and the winds being against them as he writes: *A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough* — **John 6:18**.

Now coming right here is a wonderful example of why having all four gospel accounts of the life of Christ is such a blessing. The Holy Spirit was crafting a composite picture of the life and ministry of Jesus because the Holy Spirit was designing each account for a specific kind of audience, and the Holy Spirit knew which telling of Christ’s story would resonate the most with each of those audiences. So, each of these four accounts adds their own bit of color and context to the story — and Mark gives us a wonderful example of that right now, completely unique to his gospel: *[Jesus] saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them* — **Mark 6:48a**. Now Matthew has already told us that Jesus was *up on a mountainside by Himself* and that *[l]ater that night, He was [still] there alone* — **Matthew 14:23**. Mark has also said that Jesus *was alone on land* — **Mark 6:47b**. And John adds that *Jesus had not yet joined them* — **John 6:17b** — yet He saw them. The Greek tells us that Jesus “seeing” them meant that, not only could He have physically seen them, but that He understood them; in other words, He understood exactly what they were going through. He saw how hard they were working, He saw that they were “straining at the oars.” He knew exactly what they were experiencing at that moment; He saw their emotions, He saw their fears, He saw their anxieties. He saw what they were experiencing at that moment — and He decided in that moment to join them.

So, let’s set the stage: The disciples battling a debilitating storm on the Sea of Galilee, as far from land as possible, fighting blind as they are likely in complete darkness, knowing and seeing nothing except the sound of the winds and the pounding of the waves. About as bad as it could get — until an incredible Somebody decides to pay them a visit.

***Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake* — Matthew 14:25.**

I love how “matter of fact” Matthew states this, as if Jesus is taking a walk to the corner market. Of course, by the time that Matthew is actually writing this, he absolutely knows who Jesus of Nazareth, his rabbi, his Master, truly is. He knows that, as John wrote, *Jesus was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made* — **John 1:2-3**. He knows that, as Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians: *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and*

invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him — Paul, Colossians 1:15-16.

When the disciples saw Him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear — Matthew 14:26.

There were a couple of traditions that had arisen in Jewish folklore that the hearts and minds of the disciples immediately seized. One said that, if you were to ever see a ghost in any situation, it meant that death was imminent. Another said that, after a person had died, that person’s ghost would inhabit the area where he had passed away — meaning in this immediate context a drowning. Seeing Jesus walking the waves on this dark, stormy, difficult night seemed to confirm those mythologies so, naturally, and without putting any further thought into it, they were terrified.

But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid” — Matthew 14:27.

In the midst of their struggles and their terrors, Jesus identifies in no uncertain terms who He is; in the original, He is literally saying, “I AM is here.” “I AM” is how God identified Himself to Moses back in Exodus 3 when He revealed Himself at the burning bush. Jesus is now claiming that same name, and that same meaning, as He IDs Himself to the disciples now — and He’s saying a whole lot more with that name: “I AM the one who created all things — including this wind and these waves. I AM the author of the laws of nature, and I AM the one who can rewrite those laws whenever and wherever necessary.” Now that is some ID!

And just then, Peter — who else — inserts himself into this amazing moment. ***“Lord, if it’s You,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to You on the water.” “Come,” He said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus — Matthew 14:28-29.***

We can pile on Peter for any of a number of times where he seemed so proud and sure of himself; remember at the Last Supper when Jesus said they would all bail on him and flee? Not Peter: ***“Even if all fall away on account of You, I never will. . . . Even if I have to die with You, I will never disown You” — Peter, Matthew 26:33, 35a.*** But of all the 12 guys in the boat, he was the only one who took Jesus at His word. Upon hearing Peter, Jesus said, “Come on down.” And Peter did; he got down out of the boat and walked toward Jesus. Now the Greek for the word “come” also tells us that Jesus was not inviting Peter out of the boat just go wherever he wanted, you know, “Have a nice walk, Peter; see you when you get back.” Rather, Jesus was inviting Peter to not only walk out to Him but to accompany Him, to join Him on Christ’s walk. What an opportunity for fellowship — to be able to be with Jesus, right in the middle of a miracle! Can we all say, “Wow!”

In the meantime, the disciples were in the boat, watching Peter hoist himself over the side and onto the water. Have you ever thought what they were thinking as Peter, often so full of himself that you thought one day he might need a doctor to perform a total “footectomy,” actually got out of the boat? Whatever they thought of him now, none of them followed. But the story soon turns.

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” — Matthew 14:30.

So, Peter took Jesus at his word and was walking toward him. I imagine that he began by keeping his eyes on his master, making sure he was walking directly toward him. So far, so good.

But then he began to be distracted. “Man, this is some wind. Wow, those waves are pretty big. I wonder, does Jesus know how big these waves are? Does He see me coming? What if He doesn’t? What if . . . what if?” And in becoming distracted, in losing his focus, something happens — he begins to sink into the waves. And he freaks out. The Greek word for “afraid” here is the word from which we get our word, “phobia.” But he wasn’t just afraid; he was petrified, “exceedingly fearful” according to the Greek. And in that fear, he cries out for saving — ironically from the same one who just moments before was keeping him safe on top of the water.

Immediately Jesus reached out His hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” He said, “why did you doubt?” — Matthew 14:31.

The Greek implies that Jesus was incredulous at Peter’s lack of faith, literally, “Are you kidding Me, Peter? Are you completely kidding Me?” And why not? Look at the immediate history: Peter, along with his fellow disciples, had just so recently returned from ministry, sent out with the power of Christ Himself to heal those who were sick, and release those under demonic possession, not to mention the power to preach Christ’s message. And mere hours before this, Peter had been witness to, and had even participated in, the feeding of the 5,000. “All this, Peter, and still you doubt? Really? Why don’t you believe Me?”

But fortunately, not only is Jesus a God of power but also a God of grace. And it is in that grace that He grabs hold of Peter and pulls him up.

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down — Matthew 14:32.

Just as with the last time that the disciples had been fighting a storm (Jesus had been with them but was sleeping in the back of the boat), the moment that Jesus asserted His authority, nature’s elements obeyed, again bowing to His divine kingship.

Now Mark inserts a sad reality check on the state of the disciples’ hearts at this time: ***They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened — Mark 6:51b-52.***

They were completely amazed, literally overwhelmed and besides themselves because, despite the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, they had not comprehended what that miracle (along with so many others) said about Jesus. They had still not connected all the “dots” concerning who this “Radical Rabbi” really was — despite all the evidence they themselves were witnessing.

Then those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God” — Matthew 14:33.

But we are actually seeing progress in the disciples. The first time that Jesus calmed the wind and the waves, they had said: ***“What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey Him!”*** — ***Matthew 8:27***. But now, in this moment, something seemed to at last be clicking; the disciples seemed to recognize at some level the most important reality of Christ — “I AM.” This was not just a man, not just a prophet, not just a miracle worker. They began to see Jesus for who He truly was. He was divine — the almighty Son of almighty God. And even though it might have been the least bit cozy to do so in that boat, the Greek tells us that in worshipping Jesus, they bowed down before Him.

And then John’s gospel completes this part of our text — with one more miracle, sort of the “icing” on this whole miraculous “cake”: ***[I]mmediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading*** — ***John 6:21b***.

The storm now behind them, Jesus brings them “immediately” to the shore to which He had sent them, possibly reminding the disciples in that moment of the words of the psalmist from so many centuries before: ***[T]hey cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and He guided them to their desired haven*** — ***Psalms 107:28-30***.

And as Matthew closes out this moment in Christ’s ministry, we see that, one more time, Jesus shows not just His power but His grace as they come ashore: ***When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized Jesus, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought all their sick to Him and begged Him to let the sick just touch the edge of His cloak, and all who touched it were healed*** — ***Matthew 14:34-36***.

APPLICATION

OK; so, if we put last week — the feeding of the 5,000 — alongside this story, we get an interesting picture of what is going on as Christ continues to teach His disciples. Think of last week as the “lesson” — an opportunity for the disciples to see all the reasons why they could place their complete faith and trust in Him. That would make today the “exam” — an opportunity for the disciples to act on their faith. And we need to remember that exams are not for the teacher; exams are for the student, to be able to evaluate exactly where they are in comprehending the material they have been studying. Here, Jesus is wanting them to give them an exam that allows them to evaluate themselves regarding Him - what do they believe, how strongly do they believe, how much conviction is lining up with their faith.

Now we need to know that, even as Jesus sent the disciples into their boat to head on over to the west side of the Sea of Galilee, He knew what was going to be happening: He knew about the storm, He knew about the wind and the waves, He knew about how He was going to meet them out on the lake — He knew all of those things. He wanted them to have this opportunity to see what they knew about their belief in Him. Nothing like a crisis to reveal the truth in people.

So, how’d they do on their exam? Well, they get an “F” on “Jesus recognition” when it came to seeing someone walking on the water. They’re thinking it’s a ghost; it never even

enters their minds that it could in fact be Jesus. And when Jesus tells Peter to “come on down” to meet Him, meaning of course that Peter was needing to leave the relative safety of the boat and really get out in the middle of the storm, nobody else takes Jesus up on the opportunity. Peter does that much, but then fails the “keeping your eyes on Jesus” part. All in all, as a class, they didn’t do well. For Jesus and His disciples, the lessons will continue. Eventually however, they will become master students.

Now there is another critical part of this story. We have talked about “faith” before, and this story is certainly a wonderful illustration. Peter is fine as long as he is keeping his eyeballs on Jesus. But the moment he lets himself get distracted, his faith — along with his body — begins to sink. But another word needs to be brought into the conversation, and that word is “conviction.” So how do those two fit together?

While faith might mean something I believe in, conviction is the action that results, the actions I am willing to take, based on the strength of that belief. If faith is talking the talk, conviction is walking the walk. If faith is something I believe, conviction is the hill I am willing to die on due to those beliefs, the measure by which I am willing to put my beliefs into action, the means by which I make my faith look like something. As Howard Hendricks, late professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, put it so well: “A belief is something you will argue about. A conviction is something you will die for.” It is the “line in the sand” we will not cross. So, what do those two look like? It’s critical to the meaning of this story, and also critical to determining the valid takeaways that God wants us to find.

In this story, once Jesus had ID’d Himself, Peter challenged Him that, if in fact this was true, He should call Peter to come and join Him in walking on the water. Once Christ told him to come, Peter exercised faith in Jesus’ word by getting out of the boat and walking the waves toward Him. But he got out of that boat with a divided mind — the literal meaning for the Greek word for “doubt” — and that doomed him. As he took his eyes off of Christ, and as his senses began to emphasize the power of the wind and the waves, his faith in Jesus dwindled, replaced by his faith in the forces of nature. In this case, he had faith but no conviction; his faith was unable to support a conviction that said that, if Jesus was in charge, the wind and the waves didn’t matter. His faith in the wind and the waves over Christ is precisely the reason Peter began to sink. If Peter chose to believe that there was something stronger than Jesus, then Peter’s faith in Christ was full of words that signified nothing, and any conviction associated with that faith sank as quickly as Peter did.

The history of our faith is bathed with the blood of people whose faith led them to see Christ so clearly that it created in them an ability to claim conviction, to live lives that translated that, no matter what challenge to life or limb was presented, Jesus was greater. That started with those guys in the boat. Aside from the disciple John and the traitor Judas Iscariot (who committed suicide), it is thought with a great deal of certainty that the remainder of the disciples died gruesome, hate-inspired deaths. Deny Christ? No. Deny Jesus is God’s Son? Never. Deny Christ’s resurrection from the dead? Are you nuts? Deny God’s word? No way. Willing to die for all this? Bring it on! Gaining Christ was greater,

gaining heaven was greater, and those convictions fueled hills so many hundreds, and thousands, and millions of people chose that, while causing their physical death, brought them immediately into their Savior's presence. Not just having faith in Jesus but having the conviction that that Nazarene was the Savior of the world and our one and only way to the Father, thus making all else in the world by comparison meaningless and temporary. What a wonderful faith to hang on to.

CONCLUSION

A man named Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John, was being prepared to die by being burned at the stake for refusing to burn incense to the emperor. He was a beloved figure, one that nobody wanted to see killed; even some of the Roman soldiers were hoping there was a way out of this. But as his time to die came, and as he was offered one more chance to bail on his faith, he is quoted as having said the following: *“Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior?”* In one of his final prayers before his execution, he said: *“I bless you, Father, for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ.”* Wow!

We should praise God that, up until this time, in this great country, we have not had to reveal such a level of conviction to our faith, that Jesus Christ is actually Somebody we are ready and willing, and even excited, to die for. But even if that reality could be many years away, the question is still incredibly relevant to our lives today. Is our faith in Christ merely a comfort, a nice thing to do, or do we claim a conviction that says that Jesus Christ is more important than anything else in our world? Do we stand ready to do anything, say anything, simply for the desire of bringing glory to the name of Jesus? Is Jesus at the top of any list of priorities that we would ever make?

Even if death is not knocking at the door, claiming the conviction of nothing more important than Jesus Christ should be the defining characteristic that informs how we serve one another and how we love one another. It should inform how we teach our kids, how we praise in our music, how we do outreach, how we pray, how we give, how we use our time — all of it, and so much more. What does Jesus Christ mean to you? How do your convictions about him inform your life? There is no more important consideration for us to have. Let's pray!