

Dependence and Vulnerability

At first blush, today's gospel lesson seems like a bit of a magic show that really has little to do with our modern day lives.

Yet as with all things gospel, the wisdom comes when we sit with the story for awhile, seeking its depths.

And here, what do we see but that in dependence and vulnerability, amazing wonders can occur.

Peter, dependent upon Jesus, vulnerable to the elements, steps out of the boat — and walks!

In a world so bound up with control and manipulation and self-preservation, choosing dependence and vulnerability seems like a fools errand.

But is it really?

Take a gander at our current situation.

These last many years have seen a sort of shrinking in what it means to be human.

As we stare at our phones and surf the internet, we end up rejecting our innate connection with the mysterious and the sacred; because letting go and giving up are the entry points to those places.

We've exchanged dreams and mystery and wonder for the cheap substitutes of certainty and control.

Resulting in a world devoid of depth.

That diminished world leads directly to addiction and anger and authoritarianism; because we aren't meant to live in the shallows — we're created for the deep!

Today's gospel lesson is a marvelous invitation to remember that it is through vulnerability and dependence that mountains are moved.

Whether those mountains are hurtful systems that impact the whole world — or mountains that plop themselves right down in our own living rooms.

Think of those people, through vulnerability and dependence, who've learned to move mountains, who've learned to walk on water!

Think of Mahatma Gandhi who walked on water as he confronted the mountain of the British Empire with active, persistent, and stubborn non-violence.

Think of Martin Luther King, Jr, who, with millions at his side, walked on water as they all came to see that "at the center of non-violence stands the principle of love."

Think of our own Archbishop Desmond Tutu who helped lead the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

He came to see that while "people often speak of God as being even-handed, God is not even-handed.

God is biased, in favor of the weak, of the despised."

Because walking on water is rooted in vulnerability and dependence.

Letting go of control.

Trusting Christ.

These are the sacred truths that allow us to walk on water.

We walk on water when we challenge the so-called logic that the earth is ours to dominate, rather than care for.

As the horrendous fires in Maui this week underscore, it is imperative that we take the necessary and painful steps to drastically reduce carbon emissions NOW.

That this warming planet is warning us — through ever increasing plagues of fire, rain, and hurricanes — that our present course is unsustainable.

Will we take up the challenge and walk on the water of massive investment in renewable energies?

Will we face the shameful fact that those most affected by climate change are those least responsible for creating it?

The willingness to do these things is rooted in the core of our faith: that “love is not some kind of sentimentally weak response to the evils of this world, but that love is the force that every great religion sees as the supreme — unifying principle — of life.

That love is the key to creating every possibility, to solving every challenge.

This Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about love’s power is beautifully stated in the first epistle of Saint John:

'Let us love one another; for love comes from God and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God.'" [1 John 4:7]." MLK, Jr., modified.

Today's gospel calls us to reclaim what it is to be fully human.

Because to be fully human is to be inextricably bound up with the divine!

That, because of our true nature and our ultimate destiny, we are all of us called to walk on water.

Our faith is rooted in the call to get out of the boat, in the very midst of dependence and vulnerability, and trust the arm of God to hold us tight even when chaos surrounds us.

And here's the thing, walking on water isn't limited to the great social issues of our time.

How many of you are caring for elderly parents or relatives?

How many of you are caring for children – while holding down jobs and running households?

How many of you, on a day-to-day basis, leave the safety of your personal boat and step out onto the chaotic waters to care for the sick, the helpless, the vulnerable?

You too walk on water.

Every day.

My cousin Ed, who preached here at my ordination many years ago, just shared a story along these lines with me.

It fits pretty nicely into today's reflections, so I stole it and share it with you now.

Ed writes:

"I have mentioned Rosary Hill, the residence for incurable cancer patients, managed by the Dominican Sisters of St. Rose of Lima.

It has facilities in various areas of the U.S.

The facility in Hawthorne had two stories with women patients on the top floor and the men below.

As near as I could see, the medical aspect of the men's area was the domain of an elderly male nurse – an Irishman named Frank – who spoke with a brogue and who had a good sense of humor.

One summer, in a conversation, he mentioned that he hadn't been back to Ireland in many years and saw no need for a vacation.

I hastily offered to replace him should he consider a brief vacation.

But Frank took this offer as an opportunity to pass on a life lesson about service.

He said something about early morning rounds, how maybe I could make the rounds with him to see whether I could replace him for a short time.

So, early Monday morning, I accompanied Frank to the first patient.

The man was seriously ill and already on heavy sedation to ease the pain.

Nevertheless, Frank was able to carry on a conversation with him and even inject some humor while ministering to the man.

During the conversation, Frank put on plastic gloves, rolled the man over and inserted his hand into the backside of the man to help him defecate.

At that point I left the room.

I had lasted as a potential job prospect for less than an hour.

Later at lunch, talking with Frank, he was really kind and did indeed think that some parts of the job were quite difficult, and he was very understanding why a person might not choose it as a life's occupation.

He then shared a few thoughts of his own – that if he dwelt on some aspects of the work, including the death of people he had grown fond of – he too might not last more than an hour.

It was something far beyond the work itself that kept him in America – and at Rosary Hill – for more than ten years.

There are literally millions of Franks out there – living lives that make little sense to most people.” Ed Gerlock, *Senseless, Modified*.

Yes, folks like Frank and folks like so many of you, who care so gently for so many, make little sense to most people.

Nor does walking on water make sense to most people.

Yet you do it every day.

And there is this.

As we find ourselves caring for others, we gradually realize that the one receiving care, walks on water too.

To be deprived of one's ability to care for oneself, especially in the most personal aspects of our lives, requires getting out of the small boat of self and daring to walk on the frightening waves of dependence and vulnerability.

And yet, that's precisely when the magic happens.

A figure appears — and whaddayaknow?

It's Jesus!

Meeting us on all the storm tossed waves in our lives.

Meeting us as we are: dependent and vulnerable.

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