

## The Tossed Boat

The first reading starts out something like: “Here is the story of Israel and his 12 sons, the namesakes of the famous 12 tribes of Israel.”

Now, this is the beginning of God making a holy nation.

So you would think, I certainly think, that this ought to be a story of 12 guys who spend a lot of time praying.

Twelve guys who are good, through and through, who love each other dearly.

What other types of people would God possibly use to create his holy nation, a sensible person will ask, except the holy, the good, the righteous?

So I expected a story that begins with: “Off they went to church...” OR “They started a soup kitchen for hungry Moabites...” OR “These brothers were the best of friends...”

But no.

Instead, as soon as we meet them, the 10 older brothers are plotting to kill the next to the youngest brother (that would be Joseph), and the only guy even close to being half-decent (that would be the eldest) Rueben, who says: “Well, let’s not kill him; let’s sell him as a slave!”

Here are the pillars of God’s own people.

Only later, after many rough waters, anguish, and pain; do they discover how to be at peace with each other.

The Gospel story today picks up on that same theme.

Today’s story of the tossed boat meant a lot to the early church not because they spent a lot of time in boats, but because the early church was in almost constant turmoil.

All these people keep signing up for “The Way,” that bizarre new life following the crucified one.

And all these new people have sharp elbows (or so it feels); they have wrong ideas (or so it seems).

The Jewish followers of the Way are horrified that their new Greek bunkmates are still wearing their foreskins.

The Greeks can't figure out why their Jewish pew mates go crazy when bacon and eggs are served up for breakfast.

And so the story of Jesus, walking on water, and Peter, getting out there too, for a little while; whatever else it is, it's a reminder that when strife is all around it's a good idea to keep your eyes locked on Jesus.

If your eyes are locked on Jesus, there is peace, no matter what else is going on around us.

Saint Paul makes that case for us, week in and week out, but in a very strange way.

We believe Paul's letters are the inspired word of God, and so they are. The reader declares at the end of the reading: “The Word of the Lord,” and we all respond: “Thanks be to God.”

But remember this: it is the word of God spoken to community after community who are not getting along ... who are at odds between the old ways and the new ways.

Who can't seem to get it together.

My dad loved this college professor turned comedian; a fellow named Tom Lehrer.

He made up ridiculous songs accompanied by his piano, including a jazzy song about genuflecting and praying the rosary called The Vatican Rag.

I'd sing it to you, but you might fire me.

But my favorite is his song: "National Brotherhood Week."

The lyrics begin: "Oh the Protestants hate the Catholics and the Catholics hate the Protestants, and the Hindus hate the Muslims and everybody hates the Jews!"

Except, during National Brotherhood Week.

And that's the trouble with being followers of The Way.

That's the trouble with being a Christian.

Jesus has the annoying habit of calling us to live National Brotherhood Week every day of every year.

I bought this crucifix in San Francisco not long ago.

It is so gruesome, so real, so palpable.

But it reminds me that Jesus didn't die just for me, or the people I most enjoy being around.

Jesus died for all of us, for everyone living out in Kahala, and for everyone living across the street at Akepo Arms.

He died for Hitler and Bin Laden as well as for Mother Teresa and the saints of the church.

He died for all of us, even the most irritating; he even died, some will say, (it's a minority opinion), for members of Congress!

Raised from the dead, he gives us his Spirit to help us form the community that will nurture and spread the astounding news that we are loved, we are forgiven, we are children of God.

That witness comes alive as, day by day, we strive to be a community that breathes the air of compassion, the eats the food of forgiveness,

that picks up the cross of giving one another the benefit of the doubt; all the while with eyes locked on Jesus even in the face of the pounding waves of doubt, of uncertainty.

One minister puts it this way:

“Unlike a bowling league or the Coalition to Save Historic Buildings, the church is not a group of like minded people who, on their own initiative, rally around a common desire or a worthy cause. The church rather, is a peculiar people, called by God and sent out onto a dangerous sea. Were it not for the command of Christ, no one would voluntarily climb into this boat.” T. Long, Matthew, 166.

Victor Frankel survived the horrors of the Nazi death camps.

He said: “The world is in a bad state, but everything will become still worse unless we each of us does his or her best.”

How do we do our best?

Have you heard of the desert fathers and mothers?

They were, in the very early Church, 300-400 AD, monks who went into the desert to face themselves.

Their saying was: “Pay attention to yourself.”

NOT, “Be yourself,” which is some of the worst advice ever given to anyone.

Instead, “pay attention to yourself.”

You see, what the desert fathers and mothers came to see, as they paid attention to themselves, is that we are all sinners.

We are all broken somewhere, somehow.

It's one reason I encourage all of our members to come to receive holy communion: holy communion isn't a reward for saints, it's a meal for sinners.

As those desert fathers and mothers come to a deeper and deeper understanding of this truth, what they learn is this: they learn compassion.

For when we really take time to see ourselves, myself, as I really am, the good, the bad, and all the rest, it starts to get very hard to judge the gal sitting next to me.

And while many in the early church readily accept the admonitions not to kill or steal or commit adultery, the hardest of all of Jesus' commands, then and now, is his command that we not judge one another.

That's the hardest of all.

Judgment comes most quickly when I believe in my innermost self that God is far away, since then, it is I who must ride to the rescue.

Remembering that God is God is the cure.

And God is never far away.

God is always the God who is near.

When we distance God from the world we live in, we turn God into an idol, and we leave the world to rot in its sin.

When we give in to the temptation to value our church buildings over extending hands in friendship and love to the least among us, we miss the mark.

God is God of life; ALL of life, every day of life; even when we are at our best, and perhaps especially when we are at our very worst.

God is always near.

Joseph's brothers thought God was far away when they sold their brother into the deadly stream of human trafficking.

Only after much suffering, when Joseph becomes Pharaoh's right hand man; when Joseph, because of his position, single-handedly rescues his whole family from starvation, only then do the brothers too come to believe in the nearness of God.

It often takes suffering to get to where Jesus calls us.

And yet...

In the storm, when Peter faltered, did you hear it?

I know we all heard Jesus chide Peter for his lack of faith.

Peter always seems to come up short in the faith department.

Always seems to talk better than he walks.

Thankfully, Jesus made him first among the apostles, so that I can have a role model who fails nearly as often as I do.

So yes, Jesus chides Peter for his lack of faith. But before chiding Peter, Jesus does something. Did you hear it?

As Peter faltered, "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him..."

Hand to hand, grip to grip.

Just so for us.

Jesus is always there to catch us when we fall; to support us in our weakness, to strengthen us no matter the storm.

And one thing more.

This story whispers that if we want to come face to face with Jesus, perhaps we need to climb out of the safety of the boat, and head straight away into the sea of other peoples lives, particularly the lives of those who are not like us; trusting that Jesus is there, just around the corner, leading the way.

Taking that step out into the storm, it is then that we might discover, as St. Paul so gently reminds us today, that indeed: "The Word is near you, on your lips and in your heart."