

Compassion Walking
Matthew 14:22-33
August 13, 2023
First Presbyterian, Luling

A few weeks ago, I was helping out at an event at the horse therapy place. I was supposed to be the guard of the castle. The group of kids was supposed to cross the moat, but oh dear, the drawbridge had broken and not been repaired yet. So I handed out “magic lily pads” for them to use to stand on to make their way across the moat. As kids do, a few of them got impatient with the game and stepped off the magic lily pad. “Oops!” I called out. “You can’t walk on water.” Then I almost said “You’re not Jesus,” but then I caught myself and remembered that I was not at church camp, that I didn’t really know the kid who had stepped off the magic lily pad, and I had no idea if he knew anything about Jesus, about walking on water, or had had any experience whatsoever with church, good or bad. So I swallowed my words. “You can’t walk on water” would have to do. That’s how we most often hear it, or in a phrase like “little Johnny thinks his teacher walks on water.” She may well be an impressive and loving teacher, but the implied end of the sentence is that she doesn’t. She can’t walk on water, because that’s something only Jesus can do. The phrase is rapidly becoming separated from the story behind it—that is, people who have never read this gospel story, or have never even heard of it, still understand the saying.

The story behind it, at least Matthew’s version of it, tends to leave us focusing on Peter. We’re grateful for Peter, because he continually says and does things that he hasn’t thought out beforehand, that turn out to be really bad ideas. In short, we’re grateful for Peter, because he is so much like us. Mark and John don’t include Peter’s impulsive request to join Jesus in walking on water. I suspect they don’t, because like all stories in the gospels, this story is supposed to tell us something about Jesus, not about Peter. Peter’s a tempting distraction, but he’s not the main character.

What do we learn about Jesus from this walking on water episode? Let’s back up a bit before we dive in, so to speak. Let’s back up first to chapter 8, where there’s a similar story about Jesus calming a storm. They’re all in the boat together, Jesus is sleeping, a storm blows up and the disciples wake him up to say they’re about to die, please save us. He says “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” and then he rebukes the wind and sea and the storm calms. The disciples then ask the question “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea

obey him?” Our story today answers that question, and it’s interesting to compare the two.

But before we do that, let’s back up to right before our passage today. I think you read it last week, the feeding of the 5000. At the very beginning of that story, Jesus is trying to manage a moment by himself in a deserted place. But the crowds find him and make that impossible. But, unlike me when I’ve not had a moment to myself since school was out, Jesus doesn’t snap at any of them. Instead, Matthew tells us, Jesus has compassion on the crowd. He understands why they’ve followed him, knows they need him and his healing. And so he doesn’t turn them away. He cures their sick. More than that, he won’t let the disciples turn them away either—he instructs them to feed all who are gathered.

Jesus has just demonstrated his compassion for the crowds, but he still hasn’t had a moment to himself. So he sends the disciples away in the boat. Immediately. He compels them to get in the boat and go ahead across the Sea of Galilee. He dismisses the crowds, which seems like an impressive trick, given the miracle they’ve just witnessed, along with the healing he had done among them. He goes up, finally finally, up the mountain to pray by himself.

Meanwhile, the disciples are in the boat. Again, like before, a storm blows up. This time, the wind isn’t just strong, it’s actively against them.

Jesus walks on the water toward them. Early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.

But why? Surely that wasn’t the plan all along. He’d sent them ahead to the other side. Presumably, he was planning to follow later in a boat. Or possibly on foot or animal around the Sea. Surely he wasn’t planning to walk on water to catch up to them. I mean, it’s possible, since it’s Jesus.

But since we’ve just heard about his deep compassion for the crowds, and since we know that the disciples are terrified of the sea during a storm, I think it’s something else. I think Jesus walks on the water to join them because of his compassion. He knows that they’re scared, and that they need him.

Then they’re scared because they see someone walking on the water and think he’s a ghost! Not exactly what he intended, but immediately, he acts with compassion again. Don’t be afraid. Take heart. It is I. That’s an “I am,” an intentional echo of God’s words to Moses at the burning bush.

The way that Jesus has power over the elements of nature, and the “I am,” *and* his compassion—all these are indicators that this story is about Jesus’s divinity. This is reinforced with the answer to the earlier question—who is this

that even then winds and sea obey him? This time, the disciples say “Truly you are the son of God.” And they worship together.

It’s a story to depict Jesus as divine. It’s a story to underline Jesus’s compassion. Jesus walks on water. Neither Peter nor we do. We aren’t Jesus, and we aren’t divine. But that divine attribute of compassion is certainly something we can have and enact. We can embody Jesus’s compassion, even if we can’t walk on water.