

“Walking on Water”

hoped to hit something! When they did find new land, they learned about it and made maps. And when they returned home they shared their new maps and their stories with others. In that way the new world became known. This is what we have to do. It’s a new world out there, calling for explorers. And we have to do it because Jesus is still calling us, “come”. Being faithful today means learning and practicing new ways as communities of faith to respond to his callings. But responding means stepping out of the boat, and that is hard for a lot of congregations. Some congregations look at our rapidly changing society, the impact its having on congregations, and it seems to them like a perfect storm. As an old seaman’s prayer goes, “O Lord, the sea is so vast, and my boat is so small.” It seems safer for a congregation just to huddle inside the boat.

How will Varsity respond to the boat moment that faces all the church here in North America? I suggest, in this 50th anniversary year, that you do so in the confident knowledge that you are a congregation that has walked on water. Remember those stories, when you responded to the invitation of Jesus, “come!” Remember that in those moments you took risks, you trusted the one who called you, and believed yourselves able. Remember, that you brought your meagre resources to those moments, and Jesus blessed them—and you—in their use.

It’s our 50th anniversary. Imagine Varsity Acres Church celebrating its 75th anniversary, 25 years from now! What stories will they be recalling? Well, they will be telling stories of us. And what would we all like them to be saying about what we did as Varsity Acres Church in our time? How will we want to be remembered? We’d like them to say, “Thank you. Thank you for hearing Jesus’ invitation, for taking the risk, trusting in him and walking on water, again and again and again.” We would like them to say, “Because you did that then, We were blessed today.” What we do today, and tomorrow, will become the stories Varsity Acres Church will tell one day, years from now. Let’s make them good stories by stepping out of the boat.

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Text: Matthew 14.1-33

Rev. Peter Coutts

What a day for the disciples! In their time following Jesus they had already been moved by his teaching and astonished by his miracles. And then this day happened: a crowd of crushing size anxiously and excitedly followed Jesus into the desert, he performed acts of healing, thousands were fed using what was only intended as a lunch for two people, then that night the disciples saw Jesus walking on water. The experience would be mind-blowing! Peter’s mind was blown, and he was so caught up with all he had seen that he entreated his master: “Lord, command me to come to you on the water!” And Jesus simply says “Come.” I’ve always wondered: what happened next? Did Peter just leap out of the boat? Or did he slowly extend his foot, gingerly tap the water’s surface, to test how solid it would be?

If that were you, which would you do? Would you be all in? Would you be cautious? Would you be content to stay in the security of the boat? It is **the** story of faith for us all, isn’t it? We read the Gospels and we are touched by the stories of Jesus. We look at the cross and the resurrection, and are moved to be disciples ourselves. And then life, with some regularity, presents our own “boat moments”. In the challenge of that moment, we can hear the quiet voice of Jesus, beckoning us, and we can hear in the echoes of his teaching how we can be faithful in that boat moment. But we can feel the tension between trusting that Jesus can help us take some new step in faith while also grappling with our feelings that stepping out and doing something new is risky.

At the heart of our celebrations of our 50th anniversary is the fact that our church has had many boat moments --moments when you chose to step onto the water --to leave the security of the boat, --willing to take that risk, because you desired to be faithful and you trusted the one who called. Varsity Acres has walked on water. Some of those moments may seem small and are easily overlooked, but they are still significant. You walk on water every time an infant baptized years ago makes a profession of faith as a

teenager. You walk on water when a person who has never done anything before in the church takes on a new ministry, and not only becomes a blessing to others but finds the ministry a blessing in itself.

Then there are the bigger moments. You walked on water when you took the risk of establishing Westminster Church in the late 1980's. It was hard to say good-bye to your own people, but that gift formed the core of what may well be The most successful new church start in the Presbyterian Church of our generation. How many people, do you imagine, are grateful that you established Westminster Church? You walked on water with your neighbourhood mission – Tiny Tots – providing flexible drop-in care for young children, 20 to 40 kids per day. Profits from that neighbourhood mission were turned over to other mission concerns in the community, like the Food Bank or the Calgary Drop-In Centre. How many people, do you imagine, are grateful that you were there to support their family?

A congregation is strengthened by remembering that it has walked on water. Those memories can help us have confidence for facing our next boat moment. These memories can strengthen our trust in a God of grace, who we know has helped Varsity before, and who wants nothing more than to help us again. This combination of confidence and trust in turn fosters greater hope... and when the next boat moment comes (and they always come!) that hope makes the risk of stepping out of the boat seem less risky.

The Christian church across North America faces a common and significant boat moment right now.... And we all know what it is. Since the late 1950's our society has been growing more secular. A growing number of people no longer find the notion of God meaningful nor do they find participation in faith communities relevant to their lives. To turn the story of the feeding of the 5,000 into an analogy, we followers of Jesus are surrounded by a growing crushing crowd of people who no longer want the spiritual food we serve. In fact there is a growing number of people who don't even think they need spiritual food at all. But from our point of view, we look at this crowd and think they must be starving. And Jesus' encouragement to us today is the same as in that desert place two millennia ago: "so, if they are hungry... give them something to eat."

We know exactly how the disciples felt, hearing those words of Jesus: "Us... feed all of them!?" The disciples looked down at their meagre possessions and said, "We have nothing.... nothing but five loaves and two fish". We so easily feel the same. We say, "What we have they don't even want, so what can we do?" In response, Jesus said, "OK. Here's what you can do. Give me what you think is nothing. I will bless what you have to share, even if you think it's meagre. And then, go out and share. Let's see what happens."

If you think about it, for the disciples, trying to feed 5,000, this was a boat moment, just the same as Peter stepping onto the water. Could they find in themselves the hope that they could actually feed a growing, crushing crowd? Could they trust in Jesus to help them do what seemed impossible? And the risk? Lots was at risk. The miracle might not happen, and the crowd could still be hungry. But even more significant, people might think that Jesus was a fraud, and turn their backs. And more significant still, think of the young faith of those 12 disciples. Putting their tentative, unsure trust in their master, in this act of feeding a huge crowd with one lunch? If nothing happened, would their hopes in him be dashed? For them, their boat moment was their choice to walk into the crowds with baskets that were mostly empty.

Walking into a crowd with near empty baskets. Stepping onto the water's surface. Boat moments. And we have one now as well. Each generation of Christians is entrusted with the future of faith. It is said that Christianity is always only one generation away from extinction—which is true. Generation after generation of people have learned of the Christian faith, become followers of Jesus, lived out their discipleship, and then passed that faith on to those who followed them. Now it is us who are entrusted with the stewardship of the future of faith.

So how do we engage with a society that no longer wants the spiritual food we offer? How do we engage with a society when we look into what we think are near empty baskets? That is the puzzle the church is trying to understand. And congregations across the continent are thinking outside the box and trying out new ways of being church. To continue the boat metaphor: the church today is much like the 16th century European explorers. They got in their ships, sailed off to the west over the Atlantic, and they just