

“Risking Rough Waters”

August 13, 2023

Scripture: Psalm 85:8-13; Matthew 14:22-33

Let's use our imaginations for a minute. Think about this: if you had the power to do it, what world problem would you want to solve? Is it climate change or poverty, hunger or war? The list is long because every sort of general topic leads to all kinds of subtopics, right? We live in a complex world where people face a host of problems every day that most of us aren't even aware of. I read the other day there are now over 100 million refugees and internally displaced people in the world. The majority of them, something like two-thirds, are from Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine. Most of those people are escaping violence, of course. Other people are looking for better lives for their families because things like climate change leads to poor crops which leads to hunger and food insecurity and lack of income. A huge percentage of the world's population is just one failed crop or one military coup away from starvation.

There are so many problems in the world it's overwhelming to even think about, isn't it? Let alone to actually try and solve. The reason this has come to mind for me is the work of a writer named Brian McLaren. He wrote a book awhile back called *Everything Must Change*, and he says it arose from two questions that had been rattling around in his mind for a couple of decades. The first was: What are the biggest problems in the world?; and the second: What does Jesus have to say about these global problems? In 1994 Brian was invited to travel to the country of Burundi in Africa. Burundi is the neighbor to Rwanda and has many of the same tribal conflicts between the Tutsi and Hutu populations. He was asked to help a group of clergy to think about ministry in their context in a new way.

The man who invited him, a minister named Claude Nikondeha, opened their time together by telling the group that his father had been a pastor and he spent his childhood attending church five days a week. But in all those years he only heard one sermon. He told them, “The sermon went like this: You are a sinner and you are going to hell. You need to repent and believe in Jesus. Jesus might come back today, and if he does and you are not ready, you will burn forever in hell.” Everyone in the meeting laughed because they recognized those words as the only sermon they had ever heard, too. They'd all been raised on a strict diet of hellfire and brimstone.

Brian goes on quoting Claude, “When I got older, I realized that my entire life had been lived against the backdrop of genocide and violence, poverty and corruption...Eventually I realized something. I had never heard a sermon that addressed these realities. Did God only care about our souls going to heaven after we died? Were our hungry bellies unimportant to God?” I cannot think of any place in the Bible where we're told God doesn't care about the human condition. The words of Psalm 85 describe it beautifully: In God's presence “steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss each other.” For those qualities to come together, to be expressed in the world, violence and hunger, displacement and terror must come to an end. Steadfast love and faithfulness cannot exist in a context of oppression and violence. Righteousness and peace cannot exist where hunger and fear abound.

And that leads to Brian's second question: What does Jesus have to say about these global problems? We meet Jesus today after he's fed a multitude with a few loaves and fish. He turns what could have become a hunger-fueled riot of people into a community where abundance can emerge. I mentioned last week that Jesus' first response upon learning that people were hungry was to tell his disciples to give the people something to eat. He places responsibility to care for the hungry in their laps. He then proceeds to feed the people all they need and more. Now the day's ended and he's sent his entourage ahead on the lake, the Sea of Galilee, while he finally has a chance to be alone and pray.

What happens next is a very familiar scene if you ever went to Sunday school. Quick joke: One day Moses and Jesus were out shooting a round of golf. They came to a water hazard and Jesus hit the ball; it went out about halfway and fell right in the water. Moses says, "You know, Jesus, you don't need to worry about that. We can just put it on the green and call it good." Jesus says, "No, no. Look, if Jack Nicklaus can clear that, so can I." So he walks out on the water, hunts around a little while and finds his ball and brings it back. He hits it again and bloop! right in the water. Moses says, "Seriously, Jesus, you don't need to do this." "Hey! If Jack Nicklaus can do it, so can I." Walks back out there, finds it and brings it back. Third time he hits it, same thing happens. Moses just rolls his eyes as Jesus walks back out on the water to find his ball. Another party comes through and sees this guy walking around on the water. One of them says to Moses, "Who's that guy think he is, Jesus?" Moses says, "No. Jack Nicklaus!"

Jesus walking on the water is probably meant to signify his authority over the elements; it's a way of expressing Jesus' divinity. And of course the result is the disciples worship him; they no longer just admire him. But in Matthew's version of this story Peter wants to get in on the action, too. But as he's walking he loses his nerve and begins to sink. Is it because he's not good enough? Is it because he should never have tried to do it because those forces and elements are just too big, too overwhelming for anyone to risk? Matthew says it's because he got distracted by the wildness of the water and lost his focus on Jesus. Jesus doesn't tell him he was foolish to step out of the boat, that he'll never be good enough. Or that the rough waters of the sea are too big for mere humans to risk. He says, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

What has Peter doubted? It's not Jesus. He screams for Jesus to help him. I think Peter has doubted his own ability to leave the safety of the boat and enter the rough waters. His impulse, that initial desire to join Jesus on the water is a good one. But once out there, the reality of it caused him to turn inward and distrust himself. So, what happens to Peter isn't because of anything within him that's lacking; it's because he fails to trust his own capacity to risk the rough waters.

Many scholars believe that Matthew's gospel was written in a period of great upheaval within Jewish society. It's after the temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed by the Romans and possibly in a setting where the Jewish population has been displaced because of the persecution that followed Rome's destruction of Jerusalem. You might say Matthew's community, the church he's a part of, is a boat being tossed around on a raging sea. So long as they stay huddled on the boat, they might feel safer, but they'll never have any influence on the world around them. In this story, Peter becomes the writer's icon for risking leaving the boat. It's a challenge many in that community may have seen as unthinkable. They're certain that if they do they'll surely

sink to their death. What they learn through Peter is, even though they may start to sink, Jesus is on the water waiting for them, ready to lift them up and encourage them. They can risk the rough waters by trusting Jesus' faith in them.

And that's a lesson we can learn as well. As we look out on the world with so many problems, so much pain and hardship, we might be inclined to just hunker down in our little boat and keep ourselves as safe as possible. But Jesus is out there. He's walking on those rough waters and inviting us, encouraging us, to risk them. If we step out of our boat and enter those waters on behalf of people living in poverty or people who are hungry or people seeking refuge from violence and hardship, we might actually sink. If we become distracted by the waves, the sheer enormity of the problems facing our world, we'll be overwhelmed. But if we can trust in the faith God has in us, maybe we can bring some change to the world. Maybe we can help steadfast love and justice meet, righteousness and peace to kiss.

We're not fools for trying. We're not incapable of creating change. And if we're willing to risk it, Jesus is there ahead of us, ready to catch us if we falter and to use us to calm these raging seas.

Amen