

11th Sunday after Pentecost August 13, 2023

1 Kings 19:9-18:Matthew 14:22-33

One of the things we have talked about is that often in God's reckoning the faith that is important is the communal faith of Israel. The communal faith of the church. Yes, the faith of an individual- Elijah, Peter, you- is important, but ultimately it is the you plural, the ya'll, that God and Jesus are concerned about. That they speak to. It is about how the community as a whole lives.

In this season after Pentecost we have been exploring how Jesus and the early church have understood what it means to be followers of Jesus. The Body of Christ that is the church. How God calls us to live as citizens of the reign of heaven.

We know that Jesus calls and equips us- as individuals and as a community- to do what he did. Proclaim, cure, cleanse, cast out. We know that he called and equipped us to speak truths to ourselves and others. About our own ruptured relationships with God and other human beings - which is the ugly fruit of our sinfulness. About the truth that even as messy as we are, we are God's beloved.

We know that God has given us a purpose and the right questions to ask as we follow Jesus along the journey of our lives. That we are to love one another as God in Jesus has loved us. Wholly, with no reserves. That we are to discern together in community, as a ya'll, what that love looks like at any given moment.

We know that when we yoke ourselves to Jesus, there will be work to do, it can be difficult, but it is light because it matches who God has equipped and called us

to be. We know we are to spread the seed of God's Good News everywhere and always. In how we live and speak. With wild abandon. So that others might encounter in us the unending love of God in Jesus Christ.

We know that we are not to worry about rooting out evil, but to love everyone, spread the seed of the word everywhere and always, so that we and they might repent- change our thinking and our actions, to better follow Jesus. We know that the reign of heaven that we live in as members of this fellowship of believers is like a small thing- a mustard seed- that grows mighty and strong. It is like a little bit of yeast in a whole heap of flour that transforms all it comes in contact with. Raises it up. Living in this reign is something we are all in on.

Last week we heard how one of the things we do as the Body of Christ is to feed those who are hungry. A calling we have lived out as St. John through the Ely Community Food Drive, our response to the Bishop's RAGBRAI World Hunger Appeal.

And this week, this week we learn again about our faith as individuals and as a community.

I have argued that you cannot be a follower of Jesus and not be in a community of faith. Because, as we have seen so far this season after Pentecost, Jesus is always calling us into relationship with one another. I cannot love my neighbor as myself without engaging with my neighbor. I cannot practice forgiveness and being forgiven without another person of faith. I cannot be corrected and constrained from following the primrose path to destruction without being in community with fellow believers. Those who are following Jesus on the way, too.

As our readings point out this week, individuals of faith are necessary, but so is a community of faith. An assembly of those believers. We in the United States tend to place such an importance on the individual faith that we overlook the power and necessity of Christian community.

Elijah is being hunted by his opponents who seek his life, again! He comes into the wilderness and goes to Mt. Horeb, the same place God appeared to Moses and presented the Ten Commandments to him. And on the Mount, according to the text, Elijah twice says to the Lord, "I alone am left, they are seeking my life to take it away." He is tossed about by the storm of assassins, of living a life contrary to his neighbors. He's tired. The great American lone wolf against the world. Elijah seeks God's presence in the spectacular. In the earthquake that breaks rocks, the wind- like the Derecho three years ago- that tears the very landscape apart, the fire- like that on Maui- that roars across the landscape and leaves nothing but ash. But God is not in the spectacular. Instead- it is in the sheer silence, the calm after the chaos, that the voice of God comes to him. Comes and says to Elijah, "You are not alone. I will leave seven thousand in Israel" those who have not bowed to other gods. There is a faithful community of which Elijah is a part. Alongside which Elijah can serve. God says, you do not, cannot, do this work alone.

Elijah feels like it is all up to him, and God says, nope... there is a community for this. It is not all up to you alone. So don't take it all on yourself.

Then we have the gospel reading from Matthew.

Did you know, that one of the earliest images for the Christian church was a boat? In fact, the part of the church where the assembly sits (the nave) comes from the Latin *navis* which means? Ship.

It makes sense, Peter and Andrew were fishermen. Many of the early disciples came from the Sea of Galilee area and knew about boats. They would have experience with being on a boat in the middle of a storm, which could blow up quickly on the Sea of Galilee. In the Jewish imagination, evident from the very first book of the Bible, the waters were a place of chaos and danger. The early church certainly felt like a group of people traveling together in the midst of stormy seas, with persecution by Romans and Jews alike. An adverse wind for sure!

This imagery is used by Matthew here. The disciples are in the boat, an adverse wind is keeping them from making their destination, they are being battered (the word literally is tortured) by the waves. Tossed to and fro by the storm. Danger appearing all around them.

Jesus approaches them- unperturbed by the wind and storm- walking on the water. Sound familiar? The Spirit of God moved across the face of the deep.

Then, Peter, demanding that Jesus command him to come to Jesus on the water. But why? I wonder if Peter was being a bit like Elijah, focused on the spectacular, on his own encounter with God. It might be a bit like someone today praying, "Oh God, command me to go to the farthest ends of the earth!" Perhaps a desire to test or show off their faith. And Peter does walk on the water for a time (remember just a little bit – even of faith- can do great things).

But, I agree with Professor Eugene Boring, the message here is not "If he had enough faith, he could have walked on the water," just as the message to us is not "If we had enough faith, we could overcome all our problems in spectacular ways." This understanding is wrong in that it identifies faith with spectacular exceptions to the ordinariness of life. The fabric of our ordinary days and all their limitations. This is wrong because when our fantasies of overcoming this world are shattered by the realities of accident, disease, aging, and circumstance and we begin to sink, this view encourages us to feel guilty because of our "lack of faith."

Boring continues, what if the message of this text were "If he had had enough faith, Peter would have believed the word of Jesus that came to him in the boat as the real presence of God"? Faith is not being able to walk on the water -- only God can do that -- but daring to believe, that God is with us in the boat, made real in the community of faith as it makes its way through the storm, battered by the waves."

Peter did not need to get out of the boat- go to Jesus on his own. Because where was Jesus going? To the boat! What happened when Jesus got into the boat? The wind ceased.

With God in Jesus in the boat with us. When we are going his way. No storm can deter us- as a community and as individuals. Our faithfulness is not that we get out of the boat to go it alone. It is that we stay within the ship of the church, trusting that in these messy, idiosyncratic, ordinary, wonderful people around us Jesus is present with us. Giving us the ability to overcome any storm communally or individually.

This is the gift of the community of faith. One I know many of you have experienced. In the hugs, and words of condolence when a loved one dies. In meals provided, rides given, children watched. When you listen to one another in the struggle over caring for aging parents. Navigating the teenage years. When disaster strikes and the community shows up to help.

As one author put it, "Sometimes faith is seeing the boat for what it is -- a shared experience and the opportunity to lean on one another, to encourage each other in the storm while waiting on God. Peter was eager to leave his shipmates and to join Jesus, rather than to wait for Jesus to join them in the boat. Sometimes we want our own miracle at the expense of others who are in the same boat as us. Jesus reached out his hand and caught Peter, and they both got into the boat with the other disciples. It is when they are all in the boat together with Jesus that the winds calm down."

We need one another, my friends. To weather the storms of life, but also, to manage the boat!

We needed something like 55 volunteers to host VBS. If we were fully staffed on a Sunday with two services, we would need 12 people each week just to make sure everyone was greeted well, heard the word, and were fed.

We need one another, because I do not have the gift of hospitality! I don't throw a very good party. You'll be fed, but the décor will leave something to be desired. We need one another, because no one person can financially support the mission and ministry of St. John. But all of us, together, contributing our little bit, can make sure there is not only enough, but more than enough. I have always thought that was the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

The promise this morning is many. If you are out of the boat for whatever reason and are drowning in the storms of life. Jesus can save you. And bring you back into the safety of the boat that is the church. The community of faith. Ya'll.

If you are in the boat and feel like you are making no headway, tortured by troubles, questions. Look for Jesus. Cause he's coming. It might be scary at first. But once he's in the boat, and you're heading where he told you. The winds will calm.

Yes, our individual faith is important, but only within the context of a community of believers. The wider context of a community filled with communities of believers. For it is here that we are fed, encouraged, supported. It is here we find rest, healing, God's unending grace.

It is here, together, that we encounter Jesus once again. In bread and wine. Water and Word. In the face, voice, touch of those around us.