

About a month ago we heard a reading that was similar to our Gospel reading today. In that reading Jesus and the disciples embarked in a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee. All of a sudden a great windstorm arose so that water was filling the boat. The disciples ran back to Jesus, who was sleeping in the stern, and said, “**Don’t you care that we are dying?**” And Jesus rose from his sleep, rebuked the wind and the waves, and there was a great calm. Then Jesus said, “**Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?**”

Our reading today is similar. The disciples are again in a boat, although this time Jesus was not with them. Jesus had sent them across while he went up on a mountain to pray. In our reading today a strong wind arose, but it was not so strong that the boat was in danger of sinking. It just made for terribly hard work as they rowed against it. They rowed for hours until Jesus came to them walking on the water. The disciples assumed that he was a ghost. No human being can walk on water. Jesus told them that it was him. Don’t be afraid. When he got into the boat, the wind ceased.

Then Mark says, “**The disciples were utterly astounded.**” But I think that’s lacking something. Perhaps a more colloquial translation might be: “**The disciples were out of their minds,**” or “**Their minds were blown.**” But not in a good way—at least according to Mark—because he goes on to say, “**They were utterly astounded, because they did not understand about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.**”

Mark brings up the loaves. He is referring to what we heard about last week—Jesus’s feeding of the 5,000. Jesus multiplied five loaves and two fish so that 5,000 men ate until they were full. The disciples didn’t understand this. Their hearts were hard. It seems that what Mark is saying is that after such a magnificent display of Jesus’s power nothing should surprise them—not even walking on water. The disciples didn’t get it. They were unbelieving.

The disciples’ unbelief is the aspect of both readings that I’d like to focus on. In both readings the disciples are identified as lacking faith. In the reading from about a month ago Jesus asked them, “**Do you still have no faith?**” And in our reading today the disciples’ hearts are described as being hardened. These twelve men were the people who were closest to Jesus. How could they have no faith?

Maybe they did—at least according to their own estimation. I suspect that if we could travel back in time to interview the disciples, we might find that they would not have agreed with Jesus’s and Mark’s characterization of them. I think if we were to ask them whether they had faith they would have said, “Of course we have faith!” That would be pretty convincing too. They had left their livelihoods behind. They had followed Jesus. They heard his teaching. They saw his miracles. These all seem to be very good reasons to believe that they had faith, and yet they didn’t.

This shows that there is a difference between *saying* you have faith or *believing* you have faith and actually *having* faith. I think these disciples would have said that they had faith and believed that they had faith, but when push came to shove they had no faith. This wasn’t the last time either.

When Jesus was arrested the disciples quit believing in him. The shepherd was struck and the sheep were scattered. This was despite their intentions and vows of allegiance. Just a few hours before, when Jesus was instituting the Lord’s Supper, all the disciples said that they would rather die than forsake him. Peter said that even if all the other disciples would leave him, Peter wouldn’t, but we know what Peter

did a few hours later. When repeatedly questioned whether he was one of Jesus's disciples, Peter finally said, "I blanked-blank don't know the man!" And the rooster crowed.

What we can learn from the example of the disciples is that even the "best" Christians, who have the best advantages, can fool themselves when it comes to the estimation of their faith. There's no reason to believe that the disciples were being anything but sincere on Maundy Thursday when they said they were going to stick with Jesus no matter what. They believed their faith was very strong. What they believed didn't matter. They lost their faith. They quit believing that Jesus could do anything.

The reason why I am focusing on the disciples' unbelief is because we can be like them. We might like to indulge in thinking about the strength of our faith. We have our credentials just like the disciples. We've been members of this church for a long time. We've been taught. We've sacrificed. We've sent our kids to parochial school. And it's not like these thoughts are altogether bad or untrue. The disciples had similar thoughts: They had left everything for Jesus. They learned from him. They didn't give up following him. Certainly such actions are not bad or without fruit.

Where a disciple's faith goes wrong, however, is when faith is put in anything besides Jesus. A false faith is a faith that's in one's own self, in one's own actions, in one's own feelings in one's own estimation of faith. For disciples of Jesus the actions or feelings that we might believe in can be quite pious, having a lot to do with Jesus. Certainly the apostles' thoughts and feelings were very much tied up with Jesus. But faith must be grounded in Jesus as the one who acts, as the one who saves. He can do anything. We don't help him with our actions or feelings or estimations of our own faith. These things seem as likely to hurt as to help.

Therefore, as we see so often in the Bible, it is not uncommon for disciples to be humiliated. I know that's a strong word. Being humiliated is related to being humble. Being humble is the opposite of being proud. Pride comes before the fall, so being humiliated is by no means the worst thing that can happen to us. It's not fun, but if we will accept it, it can do us a world of good.

It was good for these disciples. It probably stung when Jesus asked how it was that they still didn't have faith. I'm sure they were ashamed by how they got scared and ran away. This couldn't have been how they had envisioned their faith journey. But their dreams of grandeur were not as pious as they appeared. They were a subtle replacement of Jesus being the Savior. Their complimenting of themselves, and their measuring of themselves as to how they were so much better than others—all these pleasurable thoughts weren't worth a hill of beans. They learned that by bitter experience. They were humiliated. They couldn't trust in themselves. They hadn't stuck with Jesus. What was wonderful, however, was how Jesus stuck by them. He stuck by them when they were so foolish and ignoble and had so thoroughly embarrassed themselves.

This is an important lesson. What does it mean and what does it look like to be a Christian? Having become Christians do we now soar into the stratosphere on eagles' wings? That would be nice! If you can pull it off, then good for you! But don't be surprised if your experience should be like the apostles' experience.

Your experience could be along the same lines as we heard about in our Gospel reading. We can get worn out. The disciples had rowed against that miserable wind for hours on end. We're not at our best when we are tired. I wouldn't be surprised if the disciples well remembered who it was that sent them on that miserable journey. Why had Jesus done this to them? Why had he made them so miserable? The long and short of it was that the disciples were not looking to Jesus for their strength, for their renewal, for their comfort, for their peace. That is why they were out of their minds when he showed up. They hadn't been thinking of him.

Can't you sympathize with that? I sure can. I do not think on Jesus as much as I should. I am particularly bad at thinking of him when I'm tired, when I'm worn down, when I'm looking for comfort. I don't really believe that Jesus can do anything.

So it goes. I am always repenting. I've disappointed myself countless times. I wish that wasn't so, but it is, and it's not the worst thing. It's shown me over and over again that I am not trustworthy. I cannot save myself. I have not graduated from God's forgiving grace. I go crawling back again and again: "Jesus, have mercy on me, a sinner!" I'd like to believe in myself, but my weaknesses and sins teach me that this would be a very foolish thing to believe in. If I am to have any hope of being judged as righteous before God, Jesus must do it all.

Maybe this resonates with you too. We can be friends, sharing our common love and trust in Jesus who saves disciples who are all too often disappointing. Jesus, on the other hand, never disappoints. Trust in him, not in yourself.