

"The Key That Works!"

Matthew 14:22-32, 16:13-19

As with most pastors, I am always either on the look out for sermon illustrations or am happy to have them dropped in my lap as the good Lord Jesus seems to send them. As vague as it may seem in the saying of it, one key to understanding a particular passage of Scripture is to keep an open mind. That is to say, don't let previous readings, understandings, or related teachings constrict what we think a passage is about or trying to say. It is important to be thinking along the lines of "Now what seems different about this passage, in terms of what I usually focus on? What seems to pop up and ask me to more closely investigate? What are the issues or particular actions that are more typically zoomed in on?"

It seems to me that the typical primary focus of our first Gospel reading involves the two part 1) Peter's "stepping out" of the boat, and 2) Peter's actual "walking on water." I decided to have us this morning look at something other than these two typical elements of the story. I want us to consider Peter's request of Jesus made at a time of crisis. "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." As we know, the end result is a failure of sorts for Peter. He begins to sink and of course is at physical risk of drowning. It occurred to me that this walking on water scenario was not Jesus' idea, but Peter's. Jesus obliged Peter's request but it was not Jesus' idea. Yet, on the other hand, Jesus obliged the request saying to Peter, simply, "Come." And yet again, Peter's failure not only came to pass but indeed is, as it is said, legendary. "Why," we might ask, "did Jesus agree to something of which he knew would end in failure?" If we didn't know better we might ask if Jesus knew whether Peter would fail or not? But we know for a fact that nothing escapes Jesus' knowledge of what will happen. But then the question arises, why did Jesus agree to an endeavor that he knew would end in a failure of sorts? This is the primary area of interest for us this morning. How many of us have asked something of the Lord, seemingly to have received a go-ahead, but then having had it end in something of a failure?

But before we proceed with that line of thinking, I want to offer a few thoughts regarding what some might consider a mis-application of the story.

Many a sermon has been built around the idea that "if only we have faith enough, we can do virtually anything." The subtle, or perhaps not so subtle, idea the preacher puts forth is that "if only YOU have faith enough, faith strong enough, you can succeed in your proposed endeavor." This, of course, puts enormous pressure on the individual to "just believe strongly enough." The world will never know how many people have thus been admonished and encouraged. The world will never know how many people have acted upon such an idyllic framework but only to experience failure similar to Peter. It was within this line of thinking that I recognized and realized a fine point of the text. It wasn't Jesus' idea for Peter to walk on water but was Peter's.

This scenario is not dissimilar to a related cultural assumption. It would seem that a bulk of present day high school and college graduation commencement addresses include the admonition and advice that "you can do

anything you want to do, if you want it badly enough and work hard enough for it." Every time I hear those words of advice I can't help but grimace for, with no qualifying words included, they are setting some folks up for future disappointment. Many graduates go on to find that they are not actually predisposed for whatever they want to do. They may find they are not, after all, gifted for thus and such a profession. They may find that the world, for whatever reason, doesn't want them and thus rejects them. In any event, the point is to strongly encourage folks in their pursuits but not in terms of what seems like absolute certainty.

But this takes us back to Jesus and Peter. Why is it that Jesus goes along with Peter's outlandish request? After all, what Peter asks for is outlandish, is it not? Walk on water? Who in history has done such a thing? Yet, Jesus simply says, "Come."

The story doesn't go into it here, but my experience with, and observation of, human nature is that we humans often are of such mind set and will that we are determined to do what we are determined to do even if told no. How many of us have received counsel to the contrary but were determined to go ahead anyway? How many times did I reject the farming counsel of my Dad but to my detriment? How many times have we been counseled with a "no, that's not a good idea" but responded with "thanks for the advice but I'll go ahead anyway." My personal experience, and observation of others, tells me that sometimes we have to learn the hard way. It has been said that "the longest lesson learned is the hardest lesson earned." The correlative is true. "The lesson remembered the longest stems from the lesson learned the hardest." The pain of failure seems to stay with us the longest. Kind of ironic, is it not?

There can be no doubt that Jesus, in his divinity and omniscience, knew specifically what the outcome for Peter would be. None of us have perfect faith. Even the great Peter, destined to be such a premiere example of what it means to be a devoted disciple of Jesus, had a substantive failure of faith. Why did Jesus agree to Peter's request? For several reasons I suppose, reasons of which I offer as conjecture.

First, I believe Jesus wanted Peter and us to learn the lesson that it is not wrong to aspire to great, even perhaps impossible things. For, after all, the Scripture tells us that with God nothing is impossible. Aspire to greatness, aspire to the impossible things for such aspirations are in countless and unknowable ways responsible for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

Second, I believe Jesus acceding to Peter's request, knowing that failure was going to be part of the scenario, was for the purpose of future encouragement, as ironic as that may presently seem. Jesus knows of our failures, past, present, and future. But failure does not have to have the last word. Learn from your failure. Learn the lesson and move forward, ever determined. Peter is a fantastic example for us. How many times did Peter demonstrate or experience failure, and yet he hung in there. This failure of Peter did not interrupt his determination and dedication.

The story doesn't even mention it but I wonder if Peter, after the fact, took some ribbing from the other disciples. "Hey, Peter! How'd that request to walk

on water work out for ya?!!!" Perhaps there were some unexpressed thoughts among the disciples like, "Who'd Peter think he was anyhow?! God?! What mortal man can walk on water."

Yet, Peter's request shows remarkable trust and belief in Jesus, that Jesus was, somehow, divine and not merely a man. Who but God himself could enable a mere mortal person to walk on water. This, actually, is one of the main points of the story. One of the end goals of this scenario was to provide a visible demonstration that he was and is divine, that is, God himself.

The fact that the wind, seemingly inexplicably, died down at the very moment Jesus took Peter by the hand and rescued him was not lost on the disciples. There are other stories in the Gospels where the question is asked, "How is it that even the wind and the waves, that is, nature itself, obeys the command of Jesus. Surely he is God in the flesh, God among us. That is precisely one of the final lessons of the story. Thus, we find it not illogical, but surely predictable that those in the boat at that moment worshiped Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

As I was pondering over application of this story and these various elements of understanding of the details and theology of the story, I couldn't help but think of the many Christian young people who go off into the wider world as they aspire to whatever it is they aspire to. Many young people go off to college or a particular vocational direction only to find that they are not particularly well suited, if at all, for such aspiration and vocational direction. "Lord, Jesus, help me along this vocational preparation and direction." But then it turns out that such an aspiration is ill fated.

And this is not confined merely to educational aspirations. It can be just as much an affliction for any of us regardless of vocation or stage of life.

But the point here is to not be discouraged at what seems like failure. Failures of this sort are often the gateway to something very different and better.

I got my sermon title - The Key That Works - from an incident that happened when I arrived 3 weeks ago in Bridgeport to work at my sister and brother-in-law's feed lot as part of my vacation. The old house I stayed in has internet, that is, if the router is turned on and working. But remember, a computer, of course, has to log in to the router to have connectivity. I turned on my computer and tried to log in to the router only to find that connection could not be made. I jotted down on a piece of paper the password "key" found on the router label. I then typed in the password key and hit "connect". To my surprise, and then frustration after a second, third, and fourth attempt, I could not get my computer connected. Thus, I got my sister, through whom the internet service is provided, involved and she then got the internet provider involved. Long story short, they helped me discover that I had inadvertently omitted a single character of the password when I transcribed the password key on the little piece of paper. Thus, no matter how often I tried to re-enter the password key it would not provide my computer access. A single missing character and there was no access. Stupid computers! A single missing or wrong character and you don't get in!

But it occurred to me that this is precisely the opposite of Jesus. We are not deprived of heaven or the love of Jesus because of a single mistake or fault. We are not deprived of Jesus' love and help because of our faults and mistakes. The key to understanding our discipleship with Jesus has nothing to do with perfection but to understand he accepts us and uses us regardless of our blunders and mistakes. The key to our relationship with Jesus has to do with Jesus coming to us, walking with us through our blunders and ill fated aspirations as much as through the things he actually calls us to. How do we ever know which is which? What we do know is that Jesus has promised to never leave us or forsake us. That is one of the most profound promises ever given to us.

One key to this story is the admonition to never let our failures define us, confine us, or distract us. One of the typical foci and lessons of the story is, "Keep your eyes on Jesus." That is absolutely true. But never forget that when we do, "Turn your eyes back on Jesus." This is one of the keys to a substantive relationship with Jesus.

And it was this focus on "keys" that my mind took me to our second Gospel lesson.

In that very famous passage, after the question Jesus raised about "who" other people say he is, Jesus gets very personal and asks his disciple who they, themselves personally, understand Jesus to be. Often referred to as "impetuous Peter", Peter the subject of failure in our first Gospel lesson, is the first to respond, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." We surely wonder if Peter's conclusion had anything to do with the scenario of which we read in our first Gospel lesson. He, Peter, merely but fully human, actually walked on water. Who but God could have thus enabled him? Who, but God himself, would have been obeyed by the wind and the waves? The wind and waves dying down at that specific moment - coincidence? Perish the thought.

This morning, in just a few moments, are going to receive the Lord's Supper. We should remember from time to time the idea that when we publicly take in hand and receive the bread and grape juice, we are making a public gesture and taking a public stance. We are telling the world that we belong to Jesus; we are telling the world that we believe in Jesus; we are telling the world that we believe Jesus somehow trusts and believes in us. Let us remember that Jesus broke bread even with Judas who would betray him in only a few short hours.

I would guess that most of us can at least privately acknowledge that we have let Jesus down, that we have not always lived up to the level of faith and trust to which not only Jesus calls us but to which we actually aspire. But as we hold the bread in our hands, as we lift the cup to our lips, we do so proclaiming Jesus' forgiving and unrelenting love and forgiveness. We are not confined or defined by our failure but by the successful love of Jesus procured on the cross for our sake. The only key required is to trust, serve, and obey Jesus.

I still kind of laugh at my silly mistake - omitting a single character key. I apologized to the internet company staff person for making such a simple mistake. I was truly embarrassed. But he noted not to worry, that it does happen and I'm not the first. He was just glad that we got to the bottom of it.

The key to all this is to never forget that our failures do not have to have the final word, at least not in Christ's kingdom. Amen.