

---

Get out of the boat  
Fairview United Church and Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
August 23, 2020  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 14:22-33

[slide: bond]

Is anyone here a James Bond fan? I really enjoy James Bond films. It's always great to know that there are good people there to help us every time someone gets the urge to take over the world. And clearly, Bond must exist in real life, because to date, we have not been taken over. I'm convinced of that anyway. But I have discovered that if I watch those movies too often, I start to have problems with them. I start to notice things. I am forced to see just how unrealistic the movies are.

For one thing, I am faced with the conflict between Bond being an expert in everything while at the same time never seeming to study or practice anything at all. Moreover, Bond's ability to hit his enemy with every single gun shot - even while shooting over his shoulder with a short-barreled pistol while doing a wheelie on a motorcycle, while the bad guys consistently miss him, even though they are standing on solid ground with long-barrelled rifles - is more than my imagination can handle on some days.

But of course, we are drawn to stories with "silver bullets". Stories and images where somehow, somewhere, some time, some hero will fix everything. Everything will be all right after all. And perhaps the best thing is that we won't have to make any effort ourselves. And the transformation to a perfect reality won't take long either. The final scenes in Bond movies are always relatively short.

And yet, we know that our world doesn't really work that way.

[slide: exercise]

One year I was significantly under-employed, and I had to face the cold hard reality that - yes - I no longer had any excuse to not exercise. I had the time. I had the tools. There was nothing but my own lack of motivation between me and better fitness. I could no longer say that I was too busy at work. So, I started riding my bicycle all over the place.

---

Reflecting on that experience now I find that I am of three minds. The thinking part of my brain understands that to lose 1 pound of body fat you have to burn 3500 calories. The emotional part of my brain understands that if I spent 20 years getting out of shape, it will take more than 20 minutes to get back into shape. But the rest of my brain simply cannot understand why getting into shape takes so much time and so much work! That part of my brain just knows that there must be a silver bullet - some shortcut - an easy and simple way to fitness that I just haven't found yet. And yet - sometimes - there is just no alternative to us actually doing some work ourselves.

I will admit though - I learned a lot by using my bicycle.

[image: 10 speed]

For one thing, I learned that there are many new words used by cyclists. Just walk into Canadian Tire and tell the clerk you are looking for a 10-speed and you'll know what I mean. Not only is a 10-speed now called a "sport bike", but you probably won't find one at your local Canadian Tire anyway. But I am even more mystified that cycling stores no longer sell "water bottles".

[slide: hydration]

That's right. No water bottles. And it's not because cyclists don't need to drink water anymore, it's just that the thing that holds water is now called a "hydration system".

But of course, lots of labels have changed over time.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus and Peter walk on water. Did you realize that "walking on water" has been renamed? Absolutely. It's now an extreme sport called "Liquid Mountaineering".

[slide: liquid mountaineering]

Don't laugh. Experts like Sebastian Vanderwerf and Miquel Delfortrie even give people tips on how to do it. They give advice on selecting the right shoes, on how to approach the water, and how to use your legs more efficiently to actually walk on water.

[slide: lift]

Did you know - for example - that instead of running straight into the water, you should approach on a gentle curve, which somehow gives you more lift. It's true - apparently. Even the experts admit, however, that the sport is in its infancy. They posted a video

---

explaining all about Liquid Mountaineering to YouTube in April of 2010, and it has been viewed by over 15 million people.

[slide: falling]

I invite you to check out Liquid Mountaineering on YouTube. Mind you, all of the footage just shows people running from a field or a beach into a body of water, and then falling down. But 15 million people have chosen to watch it. Of course, the fact that 15 million people have viewed a video does not mean that it was not a complete hoax - which of course it was. Sometimes, we just need to give something a new name and it can generate a lot of new interest.

[slide: boat]

In our gospel reading today, Matthew paints a very interesting story - his own version of liquid mountaineering. Once again the disciples find themselves in a boat. Once again the disciples find themselves in fear. But this time, it is the appearance of Jesus that causes some of the fear. The disciples were afraid because they didn't recognize Jesus - who looked like a ghost. Perhaps there was some fog, or at least some mist. In any case, Jesus was in a place that the disciples simply didn't expect to see him. And then Peter - on Jesus's command - walks towards Jesus on the water. In the text, it sounds as if Peter is actually succeeding. But then Peter is distracted by the wind and the waves, which also cause him fear. And so he stops walking on the water and starts sinking into it.

It always intrigues me in this story that Jesus does not start by calming the seas and the wind as the first step towards reducing fear among the disciples. The wind and the waves do not die down until the end of the story, when they are all safely back in the boat anyway. Jesus does not provide a silver bullet in this story. He lets the disciples get along as best they can. He lets the disciples do the work themselves.

Jesus does not even banish the disciple's fear. Jesus tells them not to fear, but that doesn't work, Peter responds "if it's you, Lord", which means that Peter wasn't completely sure that he believed the ghostly figure. In fact, I wonder if the disciples would have been more pleased - overall - if Jesus has simply left them alone that night, and greeted them with coffee when they landed on the shore in the morning. I'm pretty

---

sure I would have preferred that myself.

This story always raises a question for me. No - not that question. I am not particularly interested in whether or not Jesus and Peter actually walked on water. I am not particularly interested in knowing how much of this story came from the imagination of the author and how much was based on things that Jesus actually did. That may interest you, and if it does I'm more than happy to talk with you about that sometime. But for me the key question from this story is this - "Did Peter fail?" Did he fail? Is Peter a loser because he sank into the water - or is he someone we should admire because he overcame his fear - at least partially - and tried something new - even if in the end he did not succeed. Peter - to his credit - at least got out of the boat!

One of my favourite hymns in More Voices (138) is "My Love Colours Outside the Lines". I think Peter must have written the chorus himself. The chorus is, "We'll never walk on water if we're not prepared to drown, body and soul need a soaking from time to time. And we'll never move the gravestones if we're not prepared to die, and realize there are worlds outside the lines." Powerful words. "We'll never walk on water if we're not prepared to drown". I also love the hymn, "River Running in You and Me" - also in More Voices (163). Perhaps Peter wrote verse 4, "I stand on the edge, lookin' down, too scared to swim, afraid I'll drown, give me the courage to journey on, river run deep, river run free." which also speaks of fear. Because fear is something that we are dancing around in the church - something that we don't want to name directly.

[slide: fear]

Throughout the United church, we are living with a high amount of fear and anxiety now. There is a good deal of fear around survival. As budgets and memberships shrink, it raises the question of how we will survive as congregations. Almost all congregations have the same questions: How will we maintain our buildings? How will we maintain our staff? And beyond that, I see fear around identity. As Canadian society becomes less Christian - and less religious overall - how are we to be the church today? What does it mean to be a community of faith in society today? How are we to be faithful to our past while we move into an unknown future - particularly into an unknown future that we may not really want to embrace?

---

In truth, there are lots of valid reasons for fear today.

[slide: boat]

But as in our gospel today, fear is not an enemy that needs to be defeated. Fear is a reality that we have to live through and with. When Jesus came out to the disciples he did not start by eliminating fear. He started with his presence. With action. With encouragement to step out of the boat. With encouragement to step from a known world into an unknown world. Jesus didn't start by eliminating the disciple's fear - Jesus simply asked Peter to step out of the boat.

Are we waiting for a silver bullet? Are we waiting for Jesus to calm our seas and our winds? Or in today's language - are we waiting for Jesus to start making more people who want the type of church we have had for the last 90 years who will come and fill our pews again? And I'm not making that up. I have heard many church members in my former congregations say that they are waiting for society to realize that people "should" go to church, and then our membership will increase again. I'm not waiting for that. I have a far simpler plan. Let's give people a reason to come to church by putting on programs that meet their deepest needs. Besides, feeling fear isn't just within the church these days. I almost never talk with younger people without hearing something about their own fears for the future - mostly related to environmental destruction and rampant concentration of wealth. And with the current pandemic, we now have more fear in the present that is being expressed in a variety of ways.

In the church, we've been living with fear for at least 20 years. Perhaps we can share some of our expertise with others. What have we learned about living with fear that might help others? And how can we translate our wisdom around living with fear into a language and a format that the wider community will want to participate with us? And perhaps we can not only meet people where they are spiritually and emotionally, perhaps we can meet them where they are physically too instead of hoping that they will come into our buildings. The purpose of church is not to fill pews - it is to fill hearts.

[slide: step out]

Are we - like Peter - willing to step out of the boat, willing to step out of our comfort zone - even if it means that we risk being drowned? Or are we waiting for a

---

silver bullet - waiting for Jesus to fix everything for us so we don't have to make any effort ourselves?

I sometimes think it's a bit cruel to deliver messages like this during the summer. But on the other hand, now is a great time for all of us to reflect on these questions. Both of our congregations will be working this fall to "re-open" our churches. This is a great time to ask - and to imagine - what will that look like? I am very excited for the fall - it will be great!

Jesus calls us to step out of the boat. The only question is - how will we respond?  
*Amen.*