
Get out of the boat
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 14:22-33

[image: exercise]

One summer, when I was a student, I was under-employed. And I had to face the cold hard reality that 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. So, I started riding my bicycle all over the place. Reflecting on that experience 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 hard 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 have not found yet. And as a human being, I am often reluctant to accept the fact that silver bullets do not exist. Some days I do not want to accept the reality that I have to do the work myself.

I know that I am not alone here. I'm sure that most of us would love to have a silver bullet that solved our biggest problems in life. One exercise that makes us fit. One prayer that resolves our deepest woundings. One Bible verse that makes all of life make sense. In an instant. In a moment. With no real effort on our part.

Which reminds me of our gospel today. In our gospel reading today, Jesus and Peter walk on water, while the rest of the disciples wait for a silver bullet. But first ...

[image: timeout]

Forgive me - but I need a small digression here. As we know, many words have been redefined - during our own lifetime - and without our permission I might add. For example, at some point "used cars" became "pre-owned cars". "Garbage Collectors" became "Sanitation Engineers". "Prison Guards" became "Correctional Officers". Do you

know that cyclists no longer drink water from water bottles. They still need water of course. It's just that they now drink water from "Hydration Systems". And do you know that "walking on water" has also been redefined. It is now considered an extreme sport called "Liquid Mountaineering".

[image: liquid mountaineering]

Don't laugh. Experts like Sebastian Vanderwerf and Miquel Delfortrie 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.

[image: wow curve]

Did you know - for example - that you should run on water, not try to walk. Running works better. Somehow. And instead of running straight into the water, you should approach on a gentle curve, which gives you more lift. Somehow.

[image: wow sewing machine]

And when you get onto the surface of the water, you should make your feet move like a sewing machine. The experts in this extreme sport remind us that the sport is still 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.

[image: waterproof]

I invite you to check out Liquid Mountaineering on YouTube¹. It's a good reminder that if we give something a new name, it can generate a lot of new interest. And yes, I do realize that the video was really only an advertisement for footwear.

[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. Their boat was being battered by the waves. And the appearance of Jesus actually causes even more fear. The disciples were afraid because they did not recognize Jesus - who looked like a ghost. Perhaps there was some fog, or some mist. In any case, Jesus was in a place that the disciples did not expect to see him. And then Peter - on Jesus's command - walks towards Jesus on the water. In

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oe3St1GgoHQ>

the text, it sounds as if Peter actually succeeds for a few steps. 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. In fact, I wonder if the disciples would have been more happy - overall - if Jesus has simply left them alone that night, and greeted them with coffee and donuts when they landed on the shore in the morning. I'm pretty sure I would have preferred that myself.

This story always raises a particular question for me. No - not that question. I am not particularly interested in whether or not Jesus and Peter actually walked on water. That may interest you, and if it does I'm more than happy to chat with you about that sometime. But for me the key question I have about this story is very simple.

[image: Did Peter fail?]

“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 partly - and tried something new. Even if in the end he did not succeed. Peter - to his credit - at least got out of the boat! The rest of the disciples just sat in the boat - in fear, waiting for a silver bullet. Peter 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) which we will be singing together later today. 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.

Those hymns - and our reading from Matthew - speak to something we are dancing around in the church. Something that we don't usually like to name directly.

Fear.

[slide: fear]

As you may know, I'm a member of the Executive of Shining Waters Regional Council. That means that I hear lots of stories from around the wider church. And across the United Church we are living with a certain amount of fear right now. As budgets and memberships shrink, it raises the question of how we will survive as congregations. Most 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 church" in society today?

And for those of us who live in Thorncliffe Park - what does it mean to be a United Church in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood? I'm sure that for some of us, that fear came a bit closer to home when we read the financial summary that Mary Ellen sent out recently. In truth, there are valid reasons for fear today.

[image: 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 - simply his presence. With encouragement to step out of the boat. With encouragement to step from a known world into an unknown world. Jesus did not start by eliminating the disciple's fear. Jesus simply asked Peter to step out of the boat.

Peter stepped out of the boat. Then he was distracted by the wind and waves, which caused him to fear and then to start sinking. Fear is like that. It is easy to be distracted by things that cause us fear. And in the church we need to remind ourselves that our job has never been to fill pews. It is - and has always been - about filling hearts.

And we need to recognize that it takes a certain amount of bravery to even walk into an unfamiliar church. Churches are not mainstream anymore. And one consequence

of that is that many people have no idea what to expect inside a church - so they have some anxiety to even walk in the front door.

[image: church front door]

When I was fairly new here at Chapel in the Park, I remember meeting a community member who wanted a bit of support. She was from India - a student who also worked at Longos. Some of you met her. Her name was Puja. Puja never asked for money, but she was lonely and looking for ways to find her “home” in Toronto. We met for lunch 4 times. For a little while, she provided graphics for us - including the weekly poster on the front door. I would tell her the theme of our upcoming service, and she created a lovely graphic to put on the front door. Puja and I chatted easily and openly. She knew I was the minister here. She knew that this was a church. She saw me as basically friendly.

During our 3rd lunch or 4th, as we were chatting I invited her to come and see the church. The inside of the church. I do not remember why, but our discussion led to me wanting to show her something in the sanctuary. And she agreed. We were at Kandahar, so it was only short walk to the church. Simple right?

I went in the first door so that I could unlock the second door. When I got to the second door I realized she had not come through the first door. So I went back outside. And she told me she was afraid to come in to the building. Even though I was right there. The minister. She had a personal invitation. We had just spent 1 hour together sharing lunch. And yet, she was afraid. She confessed - she just did not know what to expect inside a church.

That was a real lesson for me. That it takes vulnerability for some people to even enter the building. Even with the minister at their side. I know - we would say that their fears are unfounded. But those fears are real. The question for us is - is there any way we can help lower the fears and anxieties of people so that they will enter the building?

[image: web site]

Nichola and I have been working on a project this summer. We have been re-creating our web site. The impetus for this started as a simple request from our Events Committee that we should have a better way to upload photographs from events to the

web site.

But we decided to change more than that. Our web site is the online front door of our church. So our first question was: what can we do with our web site that would help newcomers feel brave enough to come into the door of our church? What do newcomers need to know that would help them take the risk to walk in the door?

So this version of the website is decidedly outward-facing. It is primarily aimed at people who do not already know who we are. It is also intended to provide an honest, genuine introduction to Chapel in the Park United Church. I think it represents who we are. But when you read it - if you wonder - “what church is this website talking about?” please reach out to Nichola or to me.

The site also includes links to things that we ourselves need. Links to online services, newsletters, minutes, etc. But first few pages were designed and written with outsiders in mind. We want to reduce fear and anxiety that someone might have who is considering visiting us. But who does not yet know who we are.

And I suppose I should add - the purpose of most of the web site is to help new people feel brave enough to come in the door. But once they are inside - it is up to all of us to help those people find friendship, community, and other things they need. The website is like our front door. It is not the main attraction.

The web site is tidy and clean. But it is not complete. Look for improvements in the fall. And yes, event photos are not there today. But please re-visit our web site and see if those words speak to who we are - especially to people who do not already know us.

[image: boat]

I want to close by returning to our earlier question. Did Peter Fail? I would argue - no. Because Peter tried. His friends huddled in the boat, in fear, waiting for a silver bullet. If anyone failed, it was them. But Peter got out of the boat. Peter made the effort to imagine a different future. Peter - in spite of his fear of drowning - walked on water.

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 sitting back, waiting for a silver bullet - waiting for Jesus to fix everything for us so we do not have to make any effort ourselves?

Jesus calls us to step out of the boat. How do we react? Do we fiddle with our life jacket and pretend to not hear? Or do we step out of the boat?

I will be away for the next 4 weeks. But when I return, I would love to hear your own stories of the ways in which you have stepped out of the boat this summer.

Amen.