

**Sunday, August 13, 2017**  
**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 14**  
Romans 10.5-15; Matthew 14.22-33  
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My mother is a great listener. Whenever I have a problem or am having a difficult time, I know I can always talk to her about it. Sometimes it's to seek her advice, but more often than not, it's just to have a sympathetic ear. Most of the things I kvetch about to Mom are things that she can't do anything about or advise me on. But just knowing that she is there and willing to listen is enough to make me feel better. Even if it doesn't actually solve the problem. But for as long as I can remember, there is one thing that makes me want to scream whenever I talk to her about problems. After patiently listening and offering the appropriate "uh-huhs," she always – ALWAYS – ends with "things will work out; they always do." Aaagh!

Of course, I know she's right. Things do always work out. But does she have to say that? She means well, but sometimes it seems like such a meaningless platitude.

Thursday evening, during one of my regular calls to Mom, she asked me how I was doing, as always. And I went off. I just spewed a stream of frustrations and a litany of various difficulties I was dealing with. And when I was done, she responded, "Honey, I'm sorry you're having a rough time. But things will work out." To my amazement, I didn't feel the urge to scream. I merely said, "Yeah, I know they will." Actually, I felt a strange sense of comfort in hearing "things will work out." Almost as if I needed that assurance.

Now after nearly 56 years, I have no delusions that I'm actually getting more mature about my reactions. But my response, or lack thereof, surprised me. It was one of those things that stuck with me, that wanted to be looked at a little more closely. As I reflected on my inner response to Mom's "things will work out," I kept being drawn to today's Gospel reading. "Things will work out" seemed to want to merge with the story of the disciples panicking in a stormy sea; with the story of Peter trying to walk on water only to sink and start to flounder. What I came to realize after all these years is that Mom's "things will work out," with the often appended "they always do," is not a mere platitude. It's a statement of hope. And even more so, it's a statement of faith.

That is precisely what today's Gospel is about. While the story is often used to further emphasize Jesus' divinity by demonstrating his mastery over nature, it is really about his mastery over our nature – human nature. It is about the hope he provides, the faith that he engenders.

Our Gospel reading for today illustrates this in several ways. Following the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus puts his disciples in a boat and sends them on their way to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. He then goes up a mountain to pray and recharge himself. While he's doing this, the disciples are making their way across the sea and find themselves in the midst of a storm. Large waves and heavy winds buffet the boat, threatening the lives of the disciples. Naturally, they are panicked. It's then Jesus to the rescue, as he walks out across the sea toward them. Of

course, this is an unexpected sight, seeing someone in the distance walking on the water toward them. Thinking it to be a ghost, they become even more afraid. Until Jesus announces himself. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid” (Mt 14.27). It is then that everything changes for them. No longer alone, being again in the presence of their Master, the disciples are calmed.

Jesus comes to the disciples struggling in the middle of their storm. This demonstrates a couple of key truths about hope and faith. First is about holding on to hope and maintaining faith even in the midst of troubles. Particularly in the midst of troubles. When in a stormy situation, actually or metaphorically, we tend to focus on the problems, on the chaos, raging around us. A storm that can and often does become all-consuming of our attention. In such situations, it is often very difficult to see God there with us. The storm seems a place devoid of God’s presence. What the disciple’s encounter with Jesus in the storm on the sea shows is quite the opposite. The storm is not the absence of God, but rather is the meeting place with God. It is in the chaos of our troubles that we may encounter God if we are open to it. It is in the chaos that God, just as Jesus did on the sea, shows up in unexpected ways. It may not always be obvious in the moment, but we are assured that God does show up. Actually, the truth is God never actually leaves us, not even in the worst of times. We just perceive an absence, an aloneness, because we have turned our entire focus on the troubles, on the chaos, instead of focusing on God. The truth is that it is in the worst of times that God is actually most present to us.

Jesus demonstrates this in coming to the disciples. He tells them, “take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” “It is I.” Evoking the same language God used when first appearing to Moses in the burning bush. When Moses asked God’s name, and God responded “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3.14). In his words of comfort to the disciples, Jesus emphasizes his divinity as God incarnate. God with them. This is a reminder that God is always present. That with God there is always hope. This is a reminder that even in the rough times, we must continue to have faith that God is indeed there, even if we cannot always recognize it. Even in the midst of the storm, Jesus silences our fears, inspires our faith, gives us hope.

Things will work out; they always do.

Jesus’ encounter with Peter further emphasizes the point about hope and faith. Peter, always impetuous, not always thinking things through, says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water” (Mt 8.28). Jesus, undoubtedly knowing that this will not end well, decides to play along, using this as a teaching moment. Jesus says, “Okay Peter, go for it.” Peter steps out of the boat and having faith that he can indeed walk on water, actually does. For a few seconds. But then very quickly he becomes distracted. He notices the wind and the waves. He becomes focused on the chaos around him. Fear begins to set in and he begins to sink beneath the waves. Trusting in Jesus, he cries out “Lord, save me!” As he sinks, Jesus reaches out, grabs ahold of him, and pulls him into the boat.

As long as Peter remained focused on Jesus, he was able to walk on the stormy waters. What was going on around him – the wind, the rough seas – were of no concern. But the moment he became distracted by the chaos that surrounded him, he became frightened. Caught in the tension between faith and doubt, Peter soon began to flounder. He was hindered by his human

limitations. His human frailty and fears became his entire focus. And those fears quickly overcame him.

Peter took a risk in attempting to walk on water to get to Jesus. He exhibited great faith, even obedience, in focusing his attention on his Lord. He was willing, initially, to surrender fully to God in that moment. He demonstrated the power of faith and what can be achieved by focusing his attention on Jesus. But when that attention wavered, the chaos that surrounded him came crashing in, getting the better of him.

This story shows us two things. First, when we maintain our focus on Jesus, the chaos that surrounds us, our human limitations, need not get the better of us. That doesn't mean that those things merely disappear. But that with Jesus as our focus, we are able to withstand the chaos and the storms. And second, Jesus, in rescuing Peter, shows us that he also reaches out to us in our times of need. And when he does so, his presence brings us peace and assurance in the midst of whatever storms we may encounter in our lives. Even when we, like Peter, find that our faith might momentarily fail us, we are not beyond the reach of God's love and grace.

Things will work out; they always do.

You will notice that the storm did not immediately subside upon Jesus' arrival on the scene. It took a little while for that to happen. Only when Peter and the other disciples re-focused their attention on Jesus and allowed him to be the source of their strength did things calm down. Jesus does not immediately take away our troubles. For sometimes there is something to be learned in the midst of those troubles. Something that can only be learned when we re-focus our attention on the true source of our strength, the true source of our hope, the true source of our faith. As Paul reminds us in the Epistle reading today, "For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved'" (Rom. 10:13).

We live in chaotic and stormy times, globally, nationally, and personally. Ongoing wars in the Middle East and threats of war with North Korea. Increased political division and upheaval. Increased religious and racial bigotry and violence such as we saw this weekend in Charlottesville. Economic uncertainty. Environmental threats due to climate change. Issues at work. Difficulties with relationships. Health issues. Even here at church, storms threaten. Ongoing maintenance concerns. Dying air conditioners. Financial stability. An aging congregation with fewer young families. It's easy to feel as if we too are in a boat on stormy seas, buffeted by strong winds and high waves. Or maybe even as if we are sinking beneath the waves.

At such times – particularly at such times – faith and hope are more important than ever. We know that our Lord will not always calm the storms around us. At least not immediately. So we must hold on to the hope he provides us. We must hold on to our faith in the One who is the source of our strength and our salvation. We must not be distracted by what goes on around us but keep our attention on him. For he promises and demonstrates time and time again that he is always with us, even in the midst of the storms. That with Jesus as our focus, as the source of our hope and our faith, things will work out; they always do.

