

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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2 Corinthians 6:1-13

Mark 4:35-41

THE OTHER SIDE

In the story recounted in Mark's Gospel that we just heard, we certainly could focus on Jesus' strong statement, "Peace! Be still!" He was speaking to the wind while he and his disciples were out on the sea. During a storm, perhaps similar in intensity to what we had last night, the wind had gotten so wild that the waves it was making seemed to be about to flood their boat. So Jesus, in saying what he does, takes the wind's breath away, and things settle down very quickly.

Or we could delve into his double questions afterwards to his disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Certainly there is much to explore in the area of fear as an impediment to faith.

Or we could spend some time exploring what the disciples first say to Jesus: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" They were caught in a nightmare of a storm while he was the one sleeping in the stern of the boat. They would not be the last ones to have the unsettling feeling wondering whether or when the Lord was going to respond to their threatening circumstances.

Or we could explore the implications of their second question, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Even though they had seen Jesus perform great works, they were still filled with awe at this latest of his powers demonstrated. They had just seen the wind and the sea obey Jesus better than they ever would.

I could have written a sermon about any of those four statements or questions. They each have their own place in the dramatic events of this story. However, there is something also in the least dramatic of the statements at the beginning of the story. In reference to the sea before them, Jesus says to his followers, "Let us go across to the other side." In and of itself, it is a statement that can get overlooked. It seems like a rather innocuous thing to say, that is only there to set up the drama of what would happen later. We could hear it as if Jesus had been simply proposing a pleasant evening cruise - that is, until we realize that there were people of Jewish heritage on one side of the Sea of Galilee where they had been, and people who were gentiles on the other side. These groups generally had as little to do with one another as possible. Good people of the Jewish faith, who were interested in keeping themselves pure, stayed away from such places and people. And gentiles didn't mind them staying away, particularly if they were going to think of themselves as superior to them.

So there was this tremendous tear in the human tapestry, separation and enmity existing between Jews and gentiles, between gentiles and Jews. Those who have followed Jesus realize that he always seems interested to go where the norms would discourage him from doing so. Most would steer clear of the difficult, the broken, the chaotic, but Jesus heads right into them. He goes to the torn places, which is where the One who is a peacemaker needs to be. How else is the peace going to come? There are four crossings of the Sea of Galilee described in Mark's Gospel. There are two where the disciples follow Jesus' instructions to go from their familiar Jewish side over to the gentile side. The path of his ministry zigzagged back and forth from one side of the divide to the other, from one shore

of the Sea of Galilee to the other, as if with each crossing, he was making another stitch in the torn fabric of the world, mending the divide, binding one side to the other, creating a reconciling seam. Although we have to recognize that this kind of a reconciliation doesn't just take place without a challenge.

It could just be a coincidence in the gospel account, but the trips of those of Jewish heritage going across the sea toward the gentiles are very difficult passages with frightening storms popping up along the way. The return trips back to the Jewish side each time are smooth sailing all the way home. The early church, often symbolized as a ship, may have read this part of Mark as descriptive of their difficulty as Christians of Jewish heritage crossing over to the gentiles. They didn't really want to go over to the other side. Those were turbulent, stormy days for the early church, with plenty who probably thought the whole enterprise was going to sink before getting anywhere. But Jesus and the Holy Spirit said, "Let's go across to the other side." "Well, actually Lord, we'd rather stay on our own side of the divide because that other side does things in such strange ways, who can understand how they think, if they think. They are the source of most of our problems, don't you know? We'd rather stay where we are and yell at those on the other side." But Jesus says, "Let's go across to the other side."

I don't have to tell you that there are tremendous divides in our society. You know the chasms that are defined by race, economic status, and political persuasion. You and I could list plenty of other ways our society is torn. There are those who selfishly benefit by exacerbating those divides. The young white man who is suspected of murdering nine people at a historic African American church this week seemed to be motivated by racial hatred. In his statements, he indicated he had no choice but to do what he did.¹ I don't think it is wise to characterize our society as a whole by the murderous actions of a disturbed individual, but neither is it wise to ignore what separation can breed. There is a choice. Jesus says, "Let's go across to the other side."

He does so because the good news that God wants to be delivered is for all people, not just for some. But he also does so because contacts with 'those other people' can help us be less judgmental about them, whoever the 'them' may be. The stereotypes that feed suspicion and hatred fall apart when we get to know those who are somehow different from ourselves. That doesn't mean that there won't be some storminess along the way, either external or internal.

But if the church is still to be symbolized as a boat, its purpose is not found in whatever harbor might only offer safety. Rather as we go where Jesus directs, we may at times find ourselves in the center of a storm – where reconciliation is most needed, where healing is positively called for, where peace is missing in action. We go as we are, perhaps less obedient than wind and sea to the commands of our Lord. We go as we are, with some rational fears about storms and those to whom Jesus might lead us. We go as we are, with some irrational fears gnawing inside of us as well. Just as we are, is all we have, except for the One who leads us into the storm and beyond it. Because of who Jesus is, we may get to go further than we had ever planned or even thought to be safe or wise. Because of who Jesus is, he is in the boat with us. Because of who Jesus is, the external and internal storms will get addressed and we'll find ourselves at some point, by God's grace, reaching the other side, and perhaps, again by God's grace, we'll find ourselves growing in our love of God and neighbor as we become instruments of God's peace.

¹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/authorities-investigate-whether-racist-manifesto-was-written-by-sc-gunman/2015/06/20/f0bd3052-1762-11e5-9ddc-e3353542100c_story.html