

Homily – Walking On Water

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For the last several weeks our readings have been progressing through the middle of the Gospel according to Matthew. For several weeks we have been hearing Jesus teach the crowds about how to improve their lives.

Over the last few weeks we have seen Jesus with the crowds, his Disciples, and on the sea. Since much of my recent summer vacation was spent near water, I like to imagine that in today's Gospel reading Jesus and his followers were on vacation. They were on vacation, but crowds of people were interested in hearing from Jesus and receiving his words of wisdom.

And in today's reading we have one of the most memorable images of Jesus. As is depicted in every child's Bible, we have a picture of Jesus walking on the top of the water. For those that saw this happen and for those that heard about it later, this is a sign that there is something more than special about this man, Jesus.

However, many of us today are a little jaded with the story of Jesus walking on water. And, I don't know about you, but if I had to pick a super power, I think I would rather teleport. Many of today's super heroes have much cooler powers than walking on water. We have become so familiar with the story of Jesus walking on water that, even though no one else seems to be able to do it, this particular superpower has become commonplace. It doesn't "WOW" us.

Now, the phrase "walking on water" has entered our common language in a figurative way as someone who is very special. When we admire someone we say, "she walks on water". If someone performs well, is liked by a lot of people, or even gets good grades, we say, "They walk on water."

As a child I tried to literally "walk on water". Many of you may have tried this as well. You take that first tentative step from the shore and place it on top of the water. And, you concentrate really hard on keeping the foot from sinking but for me at least my foot still hits bottom every time. Maybe I'm the only one who ever tried this as a child. Maybe not.

As an adult, I still try to walk on water, in the figurative sense. I try to do it all and to be admired by all. I'm guessing that some of you do this as well. We want people to say, "He walks on water." Do you smile inside as you imagine people saying this about you? You walks on water.

In today's Gospel story, Peter also tries to walk on water, and unlike my attempts as a child, at first, Peter actually succeeds. "So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?""

I think it is interesting that the story doesn't show Peter's immediate failure at walking on water. Instead, at first he actually succeeds, and then life got in the way. Peter noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and he began to sink.

This image is also often in the pictures of a child's Bible. We have the image of Jesus standing on the water while Peter is sinking into it.

And Jesus keeps Peter safe, gives him a hand, and gives Peter some immediate feedback about what he had done. Jesus is a teacher, and we have many stories in the Bible that show Jesus giving feedback to his followers, to the woman at the well, to the Pharisees, and to many others.

I imagine Jesus' feedback is to help teach Peter to live better. I also imagine that Peter, like many of us, does not like getting feedback. Many of us want to walk on water but we don't want feedback that helps us. We are afraid of feedback.

For many of us, thinking about feedback does not cause warm and fuzzy feelings or memories. Instead, the thought of feedback triggers negative thoughts.

We think of the bad grade or comments we got on a paper.

We think of the argument we had with a loved one or friend about something we said or did.

We think of some difficulties we had with a boss at work or an awkward performance evaluation.

How many of you have tensed up as my words have triggered some negative reaction to the thought of getting feedback?

I'm still hurt by some of my own performance evaluations, and am still convinced they were written about someone else. Didn't my manager know that I walk on water?

Here is a story to illustrate further. Joey had heard a family rumor that his father, his grandfather and even his great-grandfather, all "walked on water" on their 21st birthday. Well today was his 21st birthday and if they could do it, so could he. So, off he went in a boat with his friend. When he got out in the middle of the lake, he got up and stepped out of the boat... and nearly drowned. The next day, Joey asked his grandmother why he wasn't given the same gift as the others in his family. The grandmother told him that his father, grandfather and great-grandfather had all been born in February... not in August as he was.

The attempt to walk on water did not work for Joey. And, Joey went to someone he trusted, his grandmother, to get feedback about how he might do better.

"Psychologists have a lot of theories about why people are so sensitive to hearing about their own imperfections. One is that they associate feedback with the critical comments received in their younger years from parents and teachers."

Because of our discomfort with feedback many of us miss opportunities for improvements in our relationships, in our walk with God, and in our performance of many things we do throughout the day.

When an opportunity for change or improvement comes upon us, we procrastinate, we go through denial, we brood, and we get jealous. None of these actions are helpful, but for many of us it is still the natural reaction to feedback and a need for change.

I wonder if this was Peter's reaction to the feedback from Jesus "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Are we like Peter? When we notice the strong winds of life, don't we also become frightened, and begin to sink? And, in our fear, do we keep doing the same thing and then we are surprised when we get the same results?

What are we carrying around with us that keeps us from receiving feedback and walking on water? Each of us is carrying some type of baggage, and that baggage keeps us from seeing a God who is always present with us and loving us. It keeps us from seeing the many blessings that we already have from God. Each of us needs to release the baggage we are carrying around. Whether we have baggage in the workplace, with our family, or with our God, we need to let it go.

This is one of the many messages of the Cross. The good news is that we are called to take those events and people that have convicted and crucified us and let them go. We are called to forgive others, forgive God, and even forgive ourselves from the baggage.

And you know one of the curious things of life. Often the people around us, especially those with whom we spend a lot of time, often the people around us can see the baggage we carry around. Not always, but sometimes, the feedback we get from others is what can allow us to walk on water. Feedback can shift us into healthier, loving relationship with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation. Feedback at work may be about being more productive and efficient. But, feedback about our spiritual journeys is about how we can better mirror God's love back out into a world that sorely needs it.

So today my prayer is that each of us may have someone in our lives who loves us, such that we are open to receiving feedback from them. Feedback can allow us to do a course correction in our spiritual journey, before we hit bottom. May the Holy Spirit give you feedback at just the right time and in just the right way.