

*Hope Floats*

Matthew 14:22-33

Whitefish UMC

August 10, 2008

- † If you're a fan of Sandra Bullock, now an aging "America's sweetheart," you might have seen the film whose title is the same as this sermon's. To be honest, it wasn't a very critically acclaimed movie.
- † "Hope Floats" is simply a little too cute and happily-ever-afterish for some people. Birdee, (Sandra Bullock), a Chicago housewife, ends up on the precursor of a reality TV talk show, where she learns on air that her husband is having an affair with her best friend.
- † Understandably distraught, Birdee goes home to Texas, to the little town where her mother still lives, hoping to recover something of her lost self. Welcomed by her mother, played by Gena Rowlands, she nevertheless finds that she is not so welcomed by her former classmates, most of whom have never left.
- † It turns out Birdee was a little too popular for her own good. The film flashes back to Birdee as the perfect Texas cheerleader/homecoming queen. Her classmates still resent her popularity. In fact several believe she has just learned what all the rest of them knew long ago: Life is hard.
- † One of them says, "Maybe you were like the rest of us, 'cept you were ridin' around on a float made with toilet paper flowers is all." As if to prove their point, Birdee's life takes a series of new nose-dives.

- † Birdie is drowning, in over her head, sinking fast—to use several watery metaphors. Which brings us to today’s Gospel story and Peter, whose predicament also fits those expressions.
- † At the beginning of the story, Peter is just one of the disciples, all in the same boat, on a stormy sea. Weary after the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus has sent his disciples on ahead of him and has gone by himself into the mountains to pray.
- † By nightfall, he’s still praying, while out in the water, the disciples are caught in a battle for life and death trying to steer their little boat into a high wind and even higher waves. Our translations don’t do the Greek words justice: the severity of the struggle amounted to torture, torment, severe distress. Think of *The Perfect Storm*.
- † A first century audience likely would have understood what we may not, which is the utter terror of the waters unleashed. In creation, God separated the waters with a dome above and below the earth. But to the ancients, the waters represented chaos and cause for fear.
- † After a night-long battle for their lives, the disciples were likely exhausted, soaked to the skin, and fearful of what still lay ahead. When they saw Jesus walking toward them, no wonder they cried out in terror, thinking he was a ghost.
- † But Jesus calls out to them, and offers the familiar, “Fear not! It is I—take heart!” But they don’t quite believe it is he, and they are still afraid. Turns out they have every right to be.
- † Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.” Barbara Brown Taylor says something interesting: “Now that was a strange thing to say. Why not say, ‘Lord, if it is you, make the storm stop right now.’? Or ‘Lord, if it is you, tell us what we had for supper

- tonight.’ But neither of those is the test that Peter proposes. ‘Lord,’ he says, ‘if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.’
- † Bid me come to where you are, let me join you on the water. Show me that what you can do, I can do, if only you tell me so. Take away my doubt. Make me have faith.”
  - † So Peter takes Jesus at his word and steps out of the boat to walk on the water toward Jesus. He discovers quickly that Jesus’ words of assurance did not mean the dangerous wind and waves had subsided. He was frightened for his life once again, for good reason, as he began to sink like a stone in the turbulent sea.
  - † Even if you’ve never tried to walk on water, you know how he felt. You want to believe in yourself or someone else—you want to have faith—but your hopes are dashed as usual. You try to believe that people will keep their promises—that *you* will keep your promises—but it doesn’t always work out that way.
  - † So no wonder you have doubts—of those you long to trust—and of yourself. You’d be crazy not to. All it takes is a little real life experience to know that there is good reason to fear sometimes and somethings and sombodies.
  - † No wonder Peter had doubts—if he hadn’t, would he have been really human? “Lord, save me,” Peter cries out, and Jesus does, reaching out his hand and catching him, hauling him out of the raging waters like a big old fish and dragging him to where the other disciples can pull him back into the boat.
  - † “O man of little faith,” Jesus says, “why did you doubt?” And I say to Jesus, “Why not?” Like Peter, we have faith and we doubt, we try to

walk with Jesus and we fail, we take a few steps and we sink, and we cry “Lord, save me!” and he does.

- † I wonder why he questions Peter’s doubt, and I take comfort in knowing that Jesus, as perfect as he was, had doubts as well. The scriptures tell us that he questioned God, even from the cross, and wondered why his message of peace and the kingdom of God wasn’t welcomed.
- † This story is often preached to encourage “more faith” or courage to “step out of the boat.” In fact, I’ve preached it like that myself. But I think that approach misses Peter’s real danger and justifiable fear.
- † For the truth is, fear, loss, grief, and despair are real. Death is real. There is a poignant section in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, where the mother, Orleanna Price, tells how she dealt with her child’s death in Africa. She says:
  - † “As long as I kept moving, my grief streamed out behind me like a swimmer’s long hair in water. I knew the weight was there but it didn’t touch me. Only when I stopped did the slick, dark stuff of it come floating around my face, catching my arms and throat until I began to drown. So I just didn’t stop.”
  - † How, like the fictional Orleanna, like Peter, can we keep from going under with our fears and grief? For some reason, I keep returning to the title of that sappy Sandra Bullock movie, “Hope Floats.”
  - † Now I have no idea where that expression comes from, or how the filmmakers came up with it, but I love the idea of it. I think of Emily Dickinson’s famous lines,

“Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,

And sings the tune—without the words,  
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;  
And sore must be the storm  
That could abash the little bird  
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land,  
And on the strangest sea;  
Yet never, in extremity,  
It asked a crumb of me.”

- † Yes, we long to believe that above all the worst that life can deal us...Hope floats. It's what we need: we need something that will not get sucked down into the dark and grieving places; something that will not be trapped in the muck and mud of life buried beneath the waters of sorrow—we do need something that floats to the top, that is light and rises above all.
- † Would we need Jesus if we could just stroll across the raging waters of life as it blows up into a perfect storm sometimes? No. Does that mean he is just a ghost—a figment of our need and our imagination?
- † Think of a time when you have been about to go under, when waves of grief or rage threatened to sink your greatest hopes. What held you up? Who reached out a hand to pull you back into the boat? Could you see Jesus?

- † I can't help but think of two spiritual songs—that offer answers from my own life. The first is a spiritual from the African American experience. It's called "Stayed on Jesus." One line begins, "Woke up this morning in my mind, and it was Stayed on Jesus..."
- † Then there's the chorus, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus:" "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full on his wonderful face, and the things of this world will grow strangely dim, by the light of his glory and grace."
- † Now I don't think Jesus means for us to ignore the things of this world for the light of his glory and grace, but you get the point. In this week of the Beijing Olympics, it's appropriate to think of a painting by the Chinese artist He Qi, which interprets today's Gospel message.
- † Called "Peace Be Still," the painting portrays Jesus standing in the boat with his hand raised in a gesture of peace. Above his head is a dove with an olive branch, reminding the viewer of the promise of diminishing flood waters in Genesis 8:11.
- † The disciples are seated in the boat facing Jesus with upturned faces, in a horizontal line, conveying peaceful countenances. The chaotic waters swirl around the boat, but in the boat is tranquility. He Qi points out that the horizontal lines through the disciples are at heart level. Their hearts are at peace even in the midst of turbulent waters.
- † In this painting, he captures the experience that, even in the midst of danger and fear, there is peace in the presence of Christ. And there is the promise that the turbulent waters will subside.
- † Finally, a story told by a Presbyterian pastor about an event in World War II. The Germans were pulling out of a particular port in North

Africa, and to make it more difficult for the Allies they filled huge barges with cement and sunk them across the mouth of the harbor so that ships couldn't come or go in or out of that port.

- † Try as they might to remove the obstacles the Allies couldn't find a winch strong enough to raise the barges and clear the harbor.
- † Then someone had an idea. The Allies took huge fuel tanks—the kind used in a refinery—the size of a large building. They emptied the tanks and then sealed them up so they were watertight and like huge buoys.
- † They floated them out over the sunken barges and at low tide they attached the sunken barges to the huge fuel tanks with massive chains. When the high tide came in and the water level rose the fuel tanks were lifted up and with them they lifted the barges and cleared the blockage and opened the harbor.
- † What human strength could not accomplish the eventual rise of the tide brought to reality. Of course that's a literal example of the promise that hope floats. It takes some commitment, some work, some faith.
- † But it's the same for the hope that lives in us through the grace of faith in Jesus Christ. We are in this boat together, all of us. Thanks be to God that Jesus is with us, too, reaching out his hand to us when we begin to sink.
- † Remember that your hands are meant to be his hands, too, as we reach for each other in his name. Amen.

Sources:

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