Sunday, August 7, 2005
WIND AND WAVES
Matthew 14:22-33

An old Irish blessing says: “May the road rise to meet you. May the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face, the rain fall soft upon your fields, and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.”

But what do you do when the wind is not at your back, but against you? What do you do when you are resting after a hard day’s work and everything goes wrong? What do you do when you work and work against seemingly insurmountable obstacles, when nothing seems to go right, when the wind is not at your back but in your face?

If you live in the Great Plains and in Nebraska, you know something about the wind being at your back and in your face. Pioneer stories never fail to mention somewhere the ferocity of winds on the plains. If you live where hurricanes threaten, then you know about the danger of wind and waves. Nebraskans do not know much about waves unless you happen to be an Admiral in the Great Navy of the State of Nebraska. All Nebraskans know about the wind.

A man from Indiana once asked a farmer from Nebraska why barns here never have wind vanes when east of the Mississippi almost all barns do. The seasoned farmer said, “No sense to it. You don’t need them. When you want to see which way the wind is blowing, you look out the window to see which way the barn is leaning.”

Another Nebraska native said he remembered one day when the wind stopped and everybody fell down. Yet another Nebraska farmer said that his father created his own special Nebraska wind vane. He bolted a twelve-foot logging chain to a stout post deep into the ground and then he could tell the wind direction by watching which way the chain was blowing. He said one time he could tell the wind was really blowing strong when links began to snap off the end of that chain.

Nebraska ingenuity in one such case transformed the wind problem into a household convenience. An old bachelor harnessed the sandblast that ripped through his kitchen door keyhole, holding his pots and pans in it until they were spic and span.

What do you do when the wind and the waves are against you? That was the predicament in which the disciples of Jesus found themselves one night, and it’s something with which all of us are familiar.

According to the story in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus had been with a large crowd all day long, teaching and healing. It was the same day on which he showed the disciples how to feed the crowd when the people became restless and hungry. At the end of the day, Jesus was worn out spiritually and physically. You’ve had that experience. You’ve been working with people as their leader all day long. Or as a parent, you’ve been with your children all day, and they’ve worn you out. Then you need to be alone for a time, away from people.

Jesus dismissed the crowd. Then he asked his disciples to take the boat out on the lake while he went alone in the hills to pray. This was his usual pattern. Frequently, in the evening, he spent time alone in some quiet spot to pray, rest, and regain his spiritual and physical strength.

It's a very important discipline. You need time alone after you've been with people in an intensive way. Your life needs this change of pace, this rhythm between intimacy and distance.

While he was alone in the hills, the disciples were in their boat on the lake. They, too, were tired and probably had fallen asleep. The boat drifted a good distance from the shore because of a sudden wind change that whipped up the waves. Matthew describes it by stating, "The wind was against them."

It's the next sentence in the story that's so revealing: "Early in the morning, while the wind was still against them, he (Jesus) came walking toward them on the sea. When they saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. Then Jesus spoke to them, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'"

Peter, the impulsive one, called out, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Was he testing the power of his teacher? Was he wanting to test his own faith? Maybe a little bit of both. Jesus told him to get out of the boat and walk toward him. So he did. But when Peter noticed the strong wind and the rough water as he was beginning to walk, he became frightened and began to sink. He cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. Then he said to Peter, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?"

Stories such as this one were remembered by the early church not only because of their unusual circumstances but also because of what they teach. They are like parables.

Note first how this story illustrates human distress. "The wind was against them." Distress came into the lives of the disciples while they were doing what their teacher had asked them to do. They had not embarked on some foolish enterprise. Jesus had told them to take their boat out on the lake so they could rest while he was alone.

Hasn't this been your experience? Some of the worst storms in your life, some of the biggest obstacles you have encountered, have come to you when you are doing what you are supposed to be doing. Here's an individual who is faithfully carrying out her assignment, and all of a sudden the wind and the waves are against her. The trouble is not of her own making. The storms of life, said Jesus, come into the lives of the righteous and the unrighteous. "God makes the rain to fall upon the just and the unjust." You are doing what you are supposed to be doing, and all of a sudden everything seems to go wrong.

Like the disciples in the story, in the storms of life, sometimes your little boat seems so small and vulnerable, and the sea of life so large and unpredictable. When the wind is against you and the waves are strong, you can feel quite helpless and at the mercy of the forces around you. This story describes life as you know it.

On a deeper level, the wind and the waves in this story can represent the threat of meaninglessness and the specter of eternal anonymity that confront each person, especially as you grow older. The vast majority of the world's population will live and die unnoticed outside their immediate families. In about three generations, almost all of us will be forgotten.

One person described it this way: each person has eight sets of great-grandparents. Yet very few of us can remember a single thing about the lives of any of those 16 people. Unless you do a family history, you do not even know their names. Is your fate or mine to be any different?

The Bible tells about a man named Methuselah who, according to the sacred text, lived 969 years. Yet the only thing recorded about what he actually did in all of those years is that he died. Is that to be our fate? Does getting rich help? Does striving after acclaim, success, or notoriety help? Even some of our fellow citizens who achieved the pinnacle of political power and were elected president are still quite forgettable. How many of you can relate a single fact from the life of James Polk, Franklin Pierce, or James Buchanan, three one-term presidents who served this nation prior to the Civil War?

That's what was on the mind of the author of Ecclesiastes when they wrote, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

Note secondly, however, that life takes on meaning when you reach out to help another and when someone reaches out to help you. You cannot save yourself in the long run using only your own power. You always need others, and others need you. That's what Peter discovered when he got out of the boat and began to walk on the water. At first, everything worked, but then he made the mistake of looking down, noticed the wind and the waves, and realized what he was doing. It was then that he began to sink.

You've had that kind of experience. Sometimes in the storms of life, when your faith is strong, you can be on top of the crisis. You find yourself doing things you never thought you could do. Your spouse dies, or a child dies, and you are strong. But then the wind and waves of loneliness and grief take over, and your faith begins to fail, and you have to reach out for help.

It was reported that when King Tut's tomb was opened many years ago, some wheat was discovered that had been there in the dry darkness for more than 4,000 years. When it was brought out and planted, it grew and multiplied. All it needed to release its power was to get into the right relationship with the earth and the sun.

The same is true for human beings. You grow, you find meaning, life becomes good when you are in the right relationship with others and with God. There are limits to your own individual powers. Another way of saying the same thing is that you truly experience God when you are in the right relationship with others. Someone once asked me, "Is the term 'God' a noun or a verb?" My answer: it is both. When you talk about God, it is a noun. When you experience the power of God, it is a verb. Love is a noun and a verb. Life is a noun and a verb.

Many times, however, people do not realize this fact until they find themselves adrift with the wind and the waves against them. Then they come to the realization that they cannot do it on their own. You need others, which is also another way of experiencing the power of God. That's the wisdom of the first two steps in the Twelve Steps of A.A.: "(1) We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable. (2) Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." This power that A.A. refers to is the power of God, but it is also experienced in the power of the community of alcoholics as they gather in meetings to support each other.

I admire Peter in this story for several reasons. First of all, he had enough courage to get out of the boat and try to walk on water. Did he fail? In one sense, he did, but in another sense, he did not. Sometimes failure is not so much an event; it is also the way you interpret or define an event.

Jonas Salk attempted 200 unsuccessful vaccines for polio before he came up with one that worked. Someone asked him, "How did it feel to fail 200 times trying to come up with a vaccine

for polio?" He said, "I didn't fail 200 times. I discovered 200 ways how not to make a vaccine for polio. I discovered 200 things that wouldn't work."

Winston Churchill was asked, "What most prepared you to lead Great Britain through World War II?" His answer was, "It was the time I repeated a class in grade school." The questioner then asked, "You mean you flunked a grade?" Churchill answered, "I never flunked. I was given a second chance to get it right."

Did Peter fail? In one sense, he did. His faith faltered. He started to sink. But there were eleven bigger failures in the boat. They failed privately. Their failure was safe and unnoticed. They were afraid to get out of the boat.

The difference between a passive belief and a strong, active faith is the difference between staying in the boat and taking no risks or getting out of the boat, especially when someone you trust invites you to do so. Only Peter experienced the shame of public failure. And only Peter knew the momentary glory of walking on water.

The second reason I admire Peter in this story is that he knew when to ask for help, and he was not afraid to ask for help when he needed it. It was a lesson that he never forgot.

When you think of failure, a large part of the problem can be in how you define it or in letting someone else define it for you. What the culture calls failure or success may not be the best measurement.

Einstein said, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

A high school athlete who runs a mile in four and a half minutes might well consider it an outstanding accomplishment. But a world-class distance runner would view it as not a very good record.

Everyone has problems, worries, fears, and times when the wind and the waves are against them. Everyone has failed at one time or another. You have all faced storms in your life. The big question is, what do you do when it happens? Do you get out of the boat when someone you trust invites you to do so? And then if you begin to sink, are you willing to ask for help? Amen.