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Matthew 14:22-33

1 Kings 19:9-18

Psalms 85:8-13

Romans 10:5-15

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The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

I love puzzles. And during this time of pandemic and quarantine, I have found a renewed love of them. My family might say I am a little obsessed. In fact, my husband has learned that if he doesn't know where I am, he can usually find me in the basement obsessing over each little piece. He's also learned not to ask how long I have been working.

I had become so focused on completing my puzzles that I was flying through 1,000 piece puzzles in a couple of days. So, I had to step up my game....to a 5,000-piece puzzle. Thankfully, it has slowed me down. If anything, the 5,000-piece puzzle has taught me that no matter how much I might like to rush to the finished product, the reality of putting the pieces together takes quite a bit more patience and effort. At times, it's discouraging. At other times, it's gratifying. It's the joy of gradually seeing the whole picture come together after the hours of attention. There are no shortcuts.

Working on puzzles reminds me that we are desperately driven in our culture by the need for immediate gratification. We want the finished product... and we want it right now. Yet we tend to cringe at the effort that supports the results we so desire. In our world, everything seems to be handed to us at the click of a button. We are instant consumers of an Amazon generation, information know-it-alls from Wikipedia wisdom.

And the funny thing is...it is never enough. Our need for immediate gratification has stolen the beauty of patience and of practice. Of commitment and of engagement.

We want to be fit without fitness, proficient without proficiency, wise without wisdom.

With that rush to gratification in mind, I felt a resonance with Peter this week. In our Gospel we find him wanting immediate gratification, wanting fulfillment...in that very moment. I love this story because haven't we all jumped overboard at times in our life and ungracefully sank in our unpreparedness?

Let's take a closer look at our text from Matthew. Peter is hanging out in the boat with other disciples doing his job, when suddenly, the wind picks up and the waves start crashing around them. To be sure, the disciples are no stranger to this challenge. I suspect they have experience in the midst of storms. They know how to handle rough waves. They had probably grown up fishing, learned it from fathers and uncles and friends. Fishing was a skill that had grown from years of practice. And as a result, they learned that only by working together, they would be able to manage the boat sufficiently despite whatever rough waters they encountered.

However, in our text, Peter sees Jesus in the distance...walking on the water. And, yes, it's a miracle. I don't want to gloss over that fact. But really, what I find even more interesting is that Peter had zero patience for Jesus' stroll across the sea. Miracle or no miracle. Peter wants answers to what is happening. And he wants those answers now. If he had Google, he would surely look up, "How can I walk on water like Jesus?"

In his impatience, Peter says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." In other words, do it now Jesus. Let me walk like you do. I wonder if Jesus was amused at Peter's command. After all, we know that Jesus was really good at miracle making. He had lots of practice. And here is Peter, wanting to walk on water without any proficiency or practice under his belt.

I imagine Jesus smiling to himself as he says, come on out, Peter. Give it a try. And, the results aren't so good. Peter quickly becomes frightened. He begins to doubt himself. He realizes the impetuosity of his actions and he sinks.

It's not that he didn't have good intent. I'm sure he did. He wanted so much to be with Jesus that he couldn't wait another minute. He simply took it upon himself to jump overboard, away from the others, with no essential training in "Walking on Water 101" and little to no understanding of the consequences.

Our story reminds me that our desire for immediacy...immediate results, immediate action, immediate knowledge, immediate change, has left us all deficient in some very basic essentials that are needed to grow our spiritual, ethical, and moral foundation. Deficits Peter might have been smart to think about.

Now, to help us with this idea, we are going to look at the Greek concept called *phronesis*. It's a philosophy developed by Aristotle which conveys a type of practical wisdom. But it's a specific kind of practical wisdom, one that conveys moral excellence that helps a person discern the good action that should shape any given situation. More importantly, the concept describes discernment of right action to be something that we can only cultivate through practice. It's this discernment of right action that develops our virtues...things like courage, honesty, and generosity.

In order to gain *phronesis*, one must engage in thoughtful community engagement, by learning from others, and over time growing in knowledge towards a common purpose. Notice my word choice...thoughtful, growing, over time.

As theologian Debra Dean Murphy states, it...*"is essential to the everydayness of being in community, holding before us always the questions of who we are and where we are"*

succeeding and failing to live fully into our identity. It is the art of making informed judgments about what needs to be done when those questions are answered honestly.”¹

Here’s one more concept I want you to know...all of this work and practice leads to what Aristotle called *Eudaimonia*, which simply means a life well lived where humans flourish, where we push ourselves to grow, where we work to achieve difficult things even in the midst of adversity. It also recognizes that to achieve anything of moral value is going to be difficult and will take our desire to constantly improve, to learn and grow so that we can contribute to the best of our God-given ability to the well-being of society.

And know this...There is nothing immediate about it. We can’t just jump into the water without first learning how to swim. Like Peter, there are people around us who can help...a boat full of knowledge and wisdom and skill that if given the chance will be our guide. Our job is to learn how to practice, to work through difficult situations, to address our weaknesses and allow God to help us find our strengths.

We all want immediate gratification and quick fixes to the world we find ourselves in right now. However, instead of rushing through with snap judgements and easy answers, take this opportunity to go deeper. Deeper into our prayer life. Deeper into our commitment to one another. Deeper into our understanding of our faith in action. Because those snap judgements and easy answers are usually only a band aid on the bigger issue. They won’t keep us afloat for long. We will sink if we aren’t careful.

Remember that moral integrity and right action take practice. And that practice, that commitment to being a force for good in this world is the essential foundation for God’s Beloved Community. Change isn’t immediate but it is possible. And it takes all of us, together to putting the pieces together one by one. Amen.

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/practical-wisdom-comes-pandemic>