

“Must I Sink?” (Matthew 14:22-33) Pentecost 13, August 10, 2008

My godson, Stephen, just turned 21, but I can remember as if it were yesterday what it was like when he first began to walk. There he was on one end of the room; there was his mother on the other. “Come on,” she cooed, “come to mama.” And even though this meant doing what, up to then, had seemed impossible, Stephen did go to mama. True, he kind of looked like a drunken sailor. But he was doing it! He was walking! So naturally, the rest of us cheered him on. And naturally, Stephen turned to his adoring fans. And naturally, this distraction proved to be his undoing. First, he got a little wobbly. That made him feel insecure. *That* made him feel afraid. And *that* made him stop in his tracks – a move he hadn’t quite mastered yet, so – plop! -- he landed back down on the floor. And yes, there were tears – probably more of frustration than pain – but this didn’t stop him. Back up on his feet, he tried it again...and again...and again. He just kept at it until he finally learned how to walk.

An important life lesson, wouldn’t you say? And one that all of us have learned one way or another. Do you remember how impossible it seemed when you first tried to read or write? Do remember how impossible it seemed when you first tried to swim or ride a bike? Do you remember how impossible it seemed when you first had to support yourself financially? Or if you are a parent, how impossible it seemed to do all the things a good parent needs to do? The list could go on and on, couldn’t it? Seemingly impossible things that simply had to be mastered. And you did master them. How? The same way Stephen learned to walk. Not to put too fine a point on it, you learned by getting focused, and staying focused, and just keeping at it step by step by step.

Yes, this is a very important life lesson, and nowhere is it more useful than in our spiritual life. Especially when we are faced with seemingly impossible challenges, we can’t just plop down and give up. Not if we have faith! For if there is one thing faith knows, it’s that **“with God nothing is impossible.”** Nothing! This doesn’t mean God will wave a magic wand and make everything all better. It doesn’t mean God will automatically work things out the way we want. However, it does mean that **“God will not let you be tested beyond your ability to endure, but with the trial will provide a means of getting through it.”** It does mean that God’s **“grace will be sufficient for you;”** His **“power will be made perfect in your weakness.”** It does mean that you can handle **“all things through Christ who strengthens”** you. And this is a powerful assurance to have! But it can only work for you if you apply the life lesson we’ve been talking about to your walk with the Lord – by getting focused on Him, and staying focused on Him, and just keeping at it step by step by step.

As we leaf through the pages of Scripture, this is a lesson we see illustrated again and again. What a difference it makes to get focused on the Lord, stay focused on Him, and just keep at it! Even in today’s Gospel – Peter’s attempt to walk on water – the lesson is there written between the lines. If we look beyond

the negatives – Peter’s brashness, his fearfulness, his doubt; if we look instead at what *Jesus* said and did, we will see a positive message about what it means to walk by faith – and what it can mean, even when we’re faced with seemingly impossible challenges.

Think back to the scene in our text. After a miserable night on the lake, battered by wind and waves, the disciples wake up to find themselves far away from shore. Then, in the misty light of dawn, they see something wonderful and terrifying: Jesus walking towards them...on the water! These days, some people read this and shake their heads. *Impossible! Just a myth!* But people back then knew about the law of gravity, too. That is why the disciples assumed it could not be a human being. They didn’t know what – maybe a ghost? – but not a human being. And true, it wasn’t just any human being. It was Jesus; God incarnate as a human being. And His words to them are so typical of Jesus; so loving, so concerned: **“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”**

Now, we all know what happens next. Peter calls out, **“Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.”** The words are brash, yes! But let’s give credit where credit is due. These words show significant faith. Not only does Peter assume that, since Jesus is the Son of God, of course He can walk on water, but he also assumes that Jesus is powerful enough to enable him to walk on water, too -- **“for with God nothing is impossible.”** And he doesn’t just believe this in theory. He puts himself on the line. **“Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.”**

So Jesus says, **“Come!”** And why do you suppose He does that? Is it to call Peter’s bluff? No, He knows Peter too well! Or is it to humble Peter? Let him step out of the boat and – dush! – go down like a lead weight? No, that isn’t Jesus’ style. Plus remember: Peter does make it a few steps. He does succeed in walking on water for a while. And we can see a potential lesson here: Peter learning from experience that **“with God nothing is impossible.”** *Woo-hoo! Look at what God can do!* No doubt that is part of what Jesus wants to teach him.

But only part. For, being the Son of God, Jesus knows all too well what’s going to happen next. And looking back, so do we. Right when he’s doing so well, Peter notices **“the strong wind.”** That’s not so bad. Of course he’s going to notice it. But like my godson Stephen learning to walk, he doesn’t just notice it. He’s distracted by it. So distracted that he loses focus on Jesus and focuses instead on what’s going on around him. This proves to be *his* undoing. First, he gets a little wobbly. Spiritually wobbly. That makes him feel insecure. Physically insecure. That makes him feel afraid. Emotionally afraid. And that makes him stop in his tracks. He starts to sink. **“Lord, save me!”** Peter cries out. And, of course, Jesus does. Immediately, Jesus reaches out His hand and catches him. But as He does, notice what Jesus says: **“O man of little faith, why did you doubt?”** That’s the rest of the lesson.

My friends, Peter didn't have to sink! With God's help, He could have done what seemed impossible! This story could have ended on a note of success! But it didn't, and let's be very clear why. What sunk Peter was not the laws of gravity. What sunk Peter was not the strong wind. No, what sunk Peter was **doubt**. Or put another way, what sunk him was not applying the life-lesson we've been talking about. True, he started out focusing on the Lord, and see how well he did! But then he let himself get distracted. And instead of re-focusing on the Lord, he let that distraction get to him; he started to **doubt**. Instead of focusing on what Jesus had done and was actually doing, he focused on what *might* happen, what *could* go wrong. So no wonder he started to sink! Breaking his focus on the Lord broke the stream of power from the Lord. It always does. But Peter didn't have to sink. He didn't have to. And that's the lesson here written between the lines. Not just what a difference it makes to get focused on the Lord, but how important it is to stay focused on Him and just keep at it – step by step by step.

Now, I know how this must sound to a cynic. An especially sarcastic one might even say: *So if I hear you right, that means I should be able to walk on water, too – provided I get focused on the Lord, stay focused on Him, and just keep at it.* That, of course, would not be hearing me right. In Peter's case, he had a specific invitation from the Lord. We don't – at least, not when it comes to walking on water. But when we do have a specific invitation from the Lord – that is, when we do have a specific promise or command in Scripture – then this lesson very much applies...and needs to be applied. God would not have given us promises if He didn't mean to keep them. God would not have given us commands if He didn't mean to *help us* keep them. On His end, the strength is there, the support is there, the guidance is there. He is ready, willing, and able to provide what we need as we need it. In fact, God is **“able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine!”** But what's the key to experiencing all this? On our end, what's required is trust. When we're in a situation that feels impossible, the key is trust – in the Lord for whom **“nothing is impossible.”** When stepping out in faith literally feels like walking on water, the key is trust – in the Lord who reaches out His hand and says, **Come!** The key is getting focused on the Lord, and staying focused on the Lord, and just keeping at it step by step by step.

Recently, I came across an amazing example of such faith in a biography of Nina von Stauffenberg. If the name is not familiar, she was the widow of the German officer who tried to assassinate Hitler. Three days afterward, on July 23 1944, Nina was taken prisoner by the Nazis, and not just put in a concentration camp, but in solitary confinement as well. She had no idea what would happen next, no idea what was being done to her four children, and on top of all that...she was pregnant. How do you survive in such an impossible situation? How do you keep going when every step feels like walking on water? One thing for sure: doubt was a luxury she could not afford! Only the Lord could sustain her, so that was who she focused on -- and kept focusing on, however tempted she might

have felt to give up. She could not know how much longer the war would last or how much more she would have to endure, but she did know how to trust. So she did trust. And that trust was vindicated. In fact, the biography I read was actually written by her youngest daughter, Konstanze, the one she was carrying and gave birth to in prison. Now, that's not to say everything went the way Nina would have wanted. She was a widow, after all, at the tender age of 30, left in the post-war era with very little to support her five children, and there were many other sorrows she also had to endure. But how did she find the strength to endure them? How did she find the support, the guidance she needed? Not from doubting the Lord. From trusting in Him and keeping focused on Him, step by step by step all through her life.

Nina von Stauffenberg is just one example. There are many more I could mention – in fact, many more sitting right here in this church today. You, too, have been in seemingly impossible situations. And when you were, you, too, have found that doubt is a luxury you cannot afford. Whether you felt overwhelmed by a moral challenge or a relational one; whether you felt threatened by a medical challenge or a financial one; whether it was the loss of your livelihood, the loss of a loved one, or perhaps a loved one's self-destructive behavior – you, too, learned in whatever situation: *I don't have to sink! I don't! Not if I trust the Lord. Not if I hold onto His promises. Not if I draw on His power. I don't have to sink!*

And that is the assurance all of us can take home with us this morning. I don't know what particular challenges you are facing in your life, but you and I both know that none of them are bigger than God – and that's who we need to count on to get us through. Maybe it does feel like you're walking on water. Maybe it does feel like the wind is whipping around you and the waves are getting big. But remember: you don't have to sink! Remember Who is standing before you. Remember Whose hands are reaching out to you. Remember Who says to you, **“Come.” “Come, all who labor and are heavy laden.” “Come, O blessed of my Father...”** It is the all-powerful Lord Himself! This day and every day, the Lord is there for you. So instead of focusing on the challenge or the impossibility, focus on the Lord. And stay focused on the Lord. And just keep at it – step by step by step. Amen.