

Proper 7, Year B

June 21, 2015

Mark 4:35-41 *When evening had come, Jesus said to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side. "And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith? "And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him? "*

"And he began to teach beside the sea." That is how this 4th Chapter of Mark's Gospel begins. Jesus begins teaching the crowds and his disciples in parables about the kingdom of God. The parable of the sower and the different types of soil. The parable of the seed growing mysteriously. The parable of the mustard seed. In the verse immediately before today's Gospel passage, Mark tells us, "[Jesus] did not speak to [the people] except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples." (Mark 4:34) As today's Gospel begins, the day of teaching is over, evening has come, and Jesus says to his disciples, "Let us go across to the other side of the sea." What is important for us to remember is that the story of crossing the sea in the evening is linked to the teaching that has gone on during the day. The question Mark wants us to ask is: Have these disciples in the boat with Jesus truly absorbed the wisdom he has been trying to transmit to them, and incorporated that wisdom into their lives?

As they set out in the boat to cross the sea, a sudden and violent storm arises. The disciples are all panic-stricken, fearing that they are about to be swallowed up by the sea. In stark contrast, Jesus is asleep in the back of the boat. The disciples wake Jesus up and say to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Jesus wakes up, calms the storm, and says to his disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" The teacher has been teaching them all day, in order that they might grow in faith; yet, at the end of the day when the exam is given, they fail the test.

Now before we go berating the disciples for their failure, let's admit that this is one killer of an exam! The disciples are faced with a fierce storm, and the boat is taking on water. They are confronted with powerful, uncontrolled, archetypal forces, and who *wouldn't* be afraid?

Jesus isn't. Jesus models for his disciples a faithful response to the attacks of these powerful, archetypal forces: Trusting in God in the midst of life's storms, Jesus can be at peace, assured that God is more powerful than any storm, and that God loves and cares for all his children, even in the midst of the storms of life.

The disciples, however, respond in fear, forgetting all that Jesus has just taught them about the kingdom of God, and questioning God's love: "Do you not care that we are perishing?" they shout at Jesus.

The only seascape that Rembrandt ever painted depicts this Gospel scene. It is titled *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. One of the interesting things about the painting is that there are 14 people in the boat, where we would only expect 13 – the 12 disciples plus Jesus. Art experts suspect that Rembrandt painted himself into the picture, as a way of saying, "We should envision ourselves in the same boat as the disciples."

In other words, this is not just a story of Jesus and his disciples 2000 years ago; it is a story about you and me. The storms we face may be of a different sort, but they are often just as archetypally powerful. And the question for us, as for the 12 disciples, is, "How do we respond to the storms of life – with fear, or faith?" For we, too, have heard the teachings of Jesus. Have **we** been transformed by those teachings? That is the exam question we must answer.

Fr. John Shea sees a link between the theme of today's Gospel passage and some verses from the Letter of James. "If any of you is lacking in wisdom," James instructs, "ask God, who gives to all generously without finding fault, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord." (James 1:5-7) "Our lives are constantly [exposed] to physical and social dangers," writes Fr. Shea. "When we are in the midst of them, our minds [are captured by] what threatens us. [Our minds then] mirror the winds and the waves, making us as driven and tossed as they are. In this state, we cannot receive from God. We cannot make the wisdom of Jesus' teachings work." (*ibid.*) When our minds are "double-minded and unstable", are dualistic, we cannot receive from God; we have forgotten Jesus' teachings.

Referring to the fact that Jesus has just taught his disciples all day long and in the evening they fail the exam, Fr. Shea writes: "Spiritual wisdom is notoriously difficult to pass on... I have noticed three guideposts along the way of receiving the spiritual wisdom of another. First, I *hear* about the wisdom... Second... I have to move from rational appreciation to realized understanding.... [Now,] moments of realization are often serendipitous. They happen when you least expect it. ...what happens is you 'see' the wisdom for yourself... The wisdom is now your own. You get it. If the teacher stops a sentence, you can complete it. You have inherited the tradition...

"[But] realized understanding... is not integration [which is the third guidepost]... Under Jesus' careful guidance, the disciples had made great advances. They had realized for themselves the love of God that is greater than the troubles of the world. They were ready to cross over from fear to faith. But when the troubles of

the world arrived, they could not ‘hang on’ to faith. As Evelyn Underhill admitted, ‘It is far easier... to develop and preserve a spiritual outlook on life, than it is to make our everyday actions **harmonize** with that spiritual outlook’ (*The Spiritual Life* [Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Group, 1997] 78-60). The single-hearted may see God. But the double-minded see both God and the waves, and the waves win.” (*ibid.*, p. 159)

And yet, in rare, remarkable instances, the waves do **not** win. At such times, we must pause and behold, for the kingdom of God has come near.

My friends, this past week our nation experienced a teaching moment as powerful as any parable. And I believe we must listen to this teaching and not miss it; for some day in God’s future kingdom, there may be an exam.

We all know the story by now. This past Wednesday night at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC, a 21-year-old white man joined a Bible study which was being held. He was welcomed by the black members of the study. After an hour, he took from his fanny pack a .45 caliber hand gun and shot to death 9 people, shooting each one multiple times.

Now, as I was preparing this sermon, I could not help but think that the survivors of that attack, the families of the victims, and the other members of that church are like the disciples in that boat, assaulted by a sudden and devastating storm of hatred and confusion and racism from one violent young man who was undoubtedly channeling forces of sin and malevolence from the collective unconscious in which we all live.

And I realized that it could have happened in any church. It could have happened during worship right here in this nave – a word which means “boat”. A sudden and totally unexpected storm attacking this boat, and suddenly nine of us are dead. How would **we** – if we survived – have reacted? I honestly can’t tell you how **I** would respond, but I *hope* it would be in the same spirit as the members of Emanuel AME – for their reactions were **not** like the reactions of those 12 disciples in that boat in our Gospel. John Shea writes about those disciples in that storm: “The dangers make them question if God loves them. The storm has split their minds between Jesus’ teachings about the love of God and the very real waves that beat upon and swamp their boat. They vacillate, and this vacillating keeps them from receiving from God... (p. 157)” In all of the reports I have read about the response of the members of Emanuel AME, I haven’t heard of anyone – survivors, family members, anyone – for whom this terrorist attack made them question that God loves them. The storm did not split their minds between Jesus’ teachings about the love of God and the very real waves that beat upon them – in this case, the multiple shots from that .45 caliber weapon. Like **Jesus** in the boat on the sea, these **21st**-Century disciples have remained centered in God throughout the storm.

Appearing in court on Friday, family members of those murdered expressed – of all possible reactions – forgiveness. Ethel Lance, whose mother was killed, said to her murderer, “I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you. And have mercy on your soul. You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people but God forgives you, and I forgive you.”

On Thursday, Chris Singleton, the son of victim Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, responded to the tragedy by expressing gratitude for those who reached out to him since his mother's murder.

“Love is always stronger than hate,” he said, “so if we just love the way my mom would, then the hate won't be anywhere close to where love is. We've come together as a community to try to get past these things. A tragedy has happened, but life is going to go on and things are going to get better.”

“Remarkable” doesn't even begin to describe the responses of these two young people whose mothers were just murdered.

Alanna Simmons, the granddaughter of 74-year-old retired pastor Daniel Simmons (who was among those murdered), said, “Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof that they lived and loved: ‘Hate won't win.’”

“For me, I'm a work in progress and I acknowledge that I'm very angry,” said Bethane Middleton-Brown, who appeared in court on behalf of her [murdered] sister, the Rev. DePayne Middleton Doctor. “We have no room for hate. We have to forgive.” And turning to the gunman, she said, “I pray God on your soul.”

My friends, may we listen to these powerful teachings coming to us from these bereaved Americans right here in our own country, right now in our own time. For the response of these people echoes the response of our crucified Lord from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” They have heard the wisdom of the Gospel; they have moved to a realized understanding; and they have come to integrate that understanding into the living out of their everyday lives.

Let us all pause, and behold: behold these true disciples of Christ. For they have indeed passed the exam – with flying colors.

AMEN