

Thomas R. Cook
The Church of St. Stephen the Martyr – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost; July 29, 2012

“Walking on Water”

Scripture: John 6:1-21; 9 Pentecost B (Proper 12 - RCL)

I grew up on the shore of a large lake, so, as a little boy in church, I was very taken by this story of Jesus walking on the water. And I would listen intently and get all the facts. Then I would come home from church, march straight into my bedroom, put on my bathing suit, and continue marching confidently down to the lake, to the very end of our dock. And I was quite sure that I would jump off and land ever so lightly on the surface of the lake, and off I would go for a stroll, high and dry above the waves.

Of course, the fact that I always put on my bathing suit *before* attempting this miracle should have tipped me off that, no matter how confident and faithful I thought I was, deep down inside I didn't really expect to stay dry. And, of course, I didn't.

But I was determined to walk on the water. So, early in the morning on a clear, windless day, when the surface of the lake was smooth like glass, a couple of my brothers and I swam a ways out into the lake, dragging our props with us ---a couple

of metal step ladders and a long, sturdy wooden plank--- taking them to the perfect spot where the ladders could sink into the bottom of the shallow lake with their top steps just below the surface of the water. Then we would float that board over the ladders and wait for some unsuspecting boater to approach. And when we saw a boat coming, my brothers would hold that board while I climbed up a ladder, stepped on the board, which pushed it just below the surface of the lake, and started strolling back and forth across the top of the water, waving to the passers-by as if it was all just a regular day on the lake.

Now, I know a lot of the people where I grew up were believers, but seeing someone strolling across the top of the lake usually got a pretty good reaction from the boaters. They would roar past this little “miracle,” and sure enough I would see that boat turn around and double back for another look. And that caused a little problem, because some of these boaters would come in for a better look very fast and very close, and before I knew it, I was flopping around on top of that board from the big wake off their engines, and down I would go, down into the waves! Down under the water. And they would speed away having a good laugh, and leave me behind to struggle in those waves...

The battering waves, the forces beyond our control that knock us off balance, the struggle to stay afloat, the fear of being swamped or left behind. Sounds to me a bit like life can be sometimes. My guess is the metaphor was lost on the disciples in that terrifying moment as they were rowing frantically against the wind and waves on what was once a perfectly calm sea. But I hope it's not lost on us. In the midst of the storm, here comes Jesus, just strolling across the tossing water through the wind and waves as if all is well, even when it isn't. And I wonder if they thought he might just pass right on by and leave them behind struggling in those waves. But you know he does not. He comes near them in their boat and says "It is I; do not be afraid."

Well I think that is easier said than done. How can I not be afraid sometimes, especially when life's storms are raging all around me, tossing me about like a tiny boat on an angry sea? How can I not be afraid when things are frightening and uncertain? How do I believe what Jesus asks of me?

Well, maybe I can't believe it entirely. But... I can have faith. And I think the two are not the same thing. Belief can change with new perspective, new input or evidence or experience. Belief can come and go. It can be hard to hold. Belief can be a fickle thing, as the disciples remind us. Even after seeing Jesus feed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish, even after seeing Jesus approach them walking on the water and calming the storm, even with all these signs

and miracles, they continued to be astounded and, I'm sure, amazed and confused and struggling to believe what they were seeing. But faith... I think faith is a more certain thing. Not because we always live up to it; not because we are always entirely faithful. But because I think faith is something God is helping us do. Don't be afraid. I am with you. These are things to receive in faith. I would say faith is more akin to trust than it is to belief. Maybe I can't always believe what I'm seeing, but the question is: Can we trust that God is with us, working in us, shaping us, challenging us? What Jesus is trying to teach us is that even in the midst of trouble, God is present, bringing us through the storm.

So, I never did walk on water as a boy. Yet, maybe that play was, in itself, a faithful act. But no matter how clever my design for making my own "miracle," one wave too many from a passing boat, and off I went into the water. I could no more walk across that water on my own than I could walk steadily through life without Jesus' faithfulness to me, and a trust in his presence in times of trouble, a sense of his presence in times of joy. For now, that will do. But I still would like to walk across that lake.

Close: Glory to God whose power working in us can do more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.