

Growing Faith Through Repentance

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

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Grant to us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 (NRSV)

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan.² This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father.³ Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves.⁴ But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

¹² Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem.¹³ And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am."¹⁴ So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem,¹⁵ and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?"¹⁶ "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock."¹⁷ The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan.¹⁸ They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him.¹⁹ They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer."²⁰ Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."²¹ But when Reuben heard it, he

delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.”²² Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him”~ that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore;²⁴ and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.²⁵ Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt.²⁶ Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood?²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed.²⁸ When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Matthew 14:22-33 (NRSV)

[Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear.²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”²⁸ Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”²⁹ He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”³² When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.³³ And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

In today’s gospel we hear Jesus criticizing Peter, calling him “you of little faith.” Of course, at the moment Peter is sinking into the waters of the Sea of Galilee in the middle of a storm. If we put ourselves into the mindset of Peter and the rest of Jesus’ disciples in that pre-scientific age, we can understand how they might be terrified and think Jesus walking towards them on the water was a ghost. Ancient peoples were very superstitious and believed in ghosts and spirits.

If that’s so, when Jesus says, “It is I. Do not be afraid,” Peter tries to verify that it is indeed Jesus by saying, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Maybe Peter thought the odds were that it really was a ghost. If so, he wouldn’t

have to walk on the water. If that's what was going through Peter's mind, then he had no idea what he was getting himself into. But no—it really was Jesus. That reality begins to dawn on him when he hears Jesus say, **“Come.”** Peter must have been scared when he climbed over the side. He takes a few steps. But then the reality of this crazy thing he's doing sets in and he starts to sink.

The wind and the waves and the sinking make it a terrifying, jolting experience. Even worse, Jesus calls him a **“little-faith.”** That's the literal Greek. But this terrifying experience gives Peter and the other disciples a completely new understanding of who this man is they've joined up with. Matthew tells us they **“worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”** These guys have changed since they first got into that boat.

I think we usually think that when Jesus tells Peter he's a **“little-faith”** he means he doesn't have enough faith to walk on the water. But what's really at stake here is Peter's faith in Jesus. More specifically, it's who all the disciples understand Jesus to be, and what he's up to here on earth. The best they can do at this point in their time with him is acknowledge that he is the Son of God. But in the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, even after they've seen him crucified, dead, and resurrected from the dead, even after he's appeared to them for forty days after his resurrection, they misunderstand. Just as he's about to ascend into heaven, they ask him, **“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”** (Acts 1:6 NRSV) His answer is that when they receive the Holy Spirit's power they will be his witnesses **“in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”** By this time the disciples may have come close to grasping the fullness of who Jesus really is, but clearly they needed to expand their idea of what he came to do—and of what he expected of them. He wasn't a merely national God, sent to restore Israel to its former glory. Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, come to rescue members of the entire human race.

Human beings have a propensity to think of God as someone like themselves. We anthropomorphize him. To some degree this is understandable. We are humans, living in human society, so it's to be expected that we might think of God as like a human. But let's get his take on it. Open your Prayer Book to page 655, to Psalm 50, verse 16. Let's read through verse 21:

16 But to the wicked God says: *

Why do you recite my statutes,

and take my covenant upon your lips;

17 Since you refuse discipline, *

and toss my words behind your back?

18 When you see a thief, you make him your friend, *

and you cast in your lot with adulterers.

19 You have loosed your lips for evil, *

and harnessed your tongue to a lie.

20 You are always speaking evil of your brother *

and slandering your own mother's son.

21 These things you have done, and I kept still, *

and you thought that I am like you.

It's the second part of verse 21 that gives us pause, isn't it? **“And you thought that I am like you.”** Ouch! We may not make thieves our friends or cast in our lot with adulterers, but every one of us has succumbed to the idea that it's only human to sin. We tell ourselves we can get away with doing sketchy things because after all God is pretty much like one of us. We are so stuck on ourselves that we imagine God is pretty much a peer.

I heard Bishop Dave Bane say once, **“God loves us just as we are. But he doesn't say, ‘Now don't change a thing!’”** Like the disciples, we have to change. We have to change the way we think about God and what he is doing. And the Bible word for that is “repentance.” The Greek word for “repent” is *metanoia*, which means literally “to change your mind.”

The Bible clearly teaches us that human beings really don't understand who God is and what he's doing. The experience of Joseph's brothers is a great example. In our Old Testament reading, we're given the account of how Joseph's brothers—who later became the ancestors of the tribes of Israel—become jealous of him and sell him into slavery. Unfortunately the lectionary leaves out verses 5-11, where Joseph tells his brothers and his parents about his dreams where they all sbow down to him. This is why they're jealous. We know how the story goes: Joseph winds up in Egypt, where he stores grain against a famine, and his father Israel and his brothers come there to escape the famine and live under Joseph's protection. We'll hear how that happens in next Sunday's Old Testament reading.

But to show us obtuse we humans can be about who God is and what he's doing, Genesis ends with the conclusion of this family drama. Israel dies, and Joseph and the rest of the brothers get permission from Pharaoh to go back to Canaan and bury Israel there. By the time they get back to Egypt, the brothers are afraid Joseph is going to finally get revenge on them for their selling him into slavery, so they make up a story to protect themselves from Joseph. They tell him that their father's dying wish was that he forgive them for the horrible way they treated him, and they throw themselves at his feet begging to be his slaves. Joseph responds by saying, **"Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones."** (Genesis 50:19b-21a NRSV)

God was present in Jesus when he came toward the disciples on the water and told them, **"It is I. Do not be afraid."** God was present with Joseph when he told his brothers, **"Do not be afraid! . . . Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good . . ."** Neither the disciples nor Joseph's brothers understood exactly who it was they were dealing with or what his purposes were.

So the question for us today is, "Do we?" God's message to us in both situations is **"Do not be afraid."** God in Jesus loves us more than we can imagine. He knows us completely—better than we know ourselves. In Jesus' death on the cross he has put all our sins to death as well. In Jesus' resurrection from the dead he has ushered us into the realm of eternal life and joy.

God is not like us. We hold grudges for what other people have done to us. We demand accountability for injustice and sin. So does God, but then, unlike anything human beings would do, he offers himself to bear the full consequences of our sketchy behavior, our hateful thoughts, our sin in his own body on the cross. So let's grow our faith in who God is and what he's doing. Let's repent—change our minds—and ask him to fill us with his Holy Spirit to begin to grasp the greatness of who he is and what he has done in Jesus. Amen.