

Matthew 14:22-3
“The Most Powerful Position in the World”

Rev. David Pierce
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If you were here last week then it's important for you to know, we're picking up right where we left off. If you were here last week then you may remember our scripture reading came from Matthew's gospel and from the same part of Matthew's gospel that I read for us just a moment ago. If you were here last week then you may remember what it felt like to be sitting on the hillside with Jesus and the disciples. It was a perfect spot—that hillside—not unlike the spot we are sitting in now. Rather quiet and a little removed from everything. The disciples, who had just come off a long week of ministry and were due for some R&R, had to take a boat across a lake to get there. And Jesus, Jesus had recently received news that his cousin John the Baptist had been executed by King Herod for the crime of publically calling out the king. It had been discovered that Herod was having an affair, an act that John said was shameful and abusive, even for a king. Sad, grieving, and emotionally spent, a little time under the sun on a lonely hillside would be just the ticket for Jesus and his disciples.

Except when Jesus and his disciples get to that hillside, there are 5,000 or more people gathered about waiting for them. And the people, Matthew notes, are hungry. Not hungry for a mid-morning snack. I mean, forced to pick scraps-from-the-trash-for-days hungry. And Jesus, turning to the disciples—tired, worn down and looking for the closest exit—tells them, “You give these people something to eat.” But how could they? All they had on hand were a few loaves of bread and a couple fish, and they were pretty hungry themselves. Feed the crowds and they'll never go away. Don't feed them and they'll never go away. In such situations, is there really a good next move? And Jesus says, “Give me what you got.” And taking their bits of bread and fish he blesses it and breaks it and gives it to the disciples, as if to say, this much you can always do.

The crowds had more than their fill that day on the hillside, records Matthew. So much bread and fish that there were basketfuls of leftovers. And with that Jesus wastes no time in telling the disciples to get back in the boat. Maybe Jesus knew that if they stuck around for too long, the crowds would start asking for dessert. Maybe he just wanted to finish what he'd started that day. He had set out to find a quiet spot to recharge and dang if he wasn't going to find one still. Whatever the case, immediately he makes the disciples set

sail for the other side of the lake while he hangs back to break up the crowd. This is, perhaps, the most curious feature of the story, that having arrived on the hillside with the disciples, Jesus does not leave with them.

For just before the story of the feeding of the 5,000 begins, we're told that Jesus and the disciples have gotten into a boat and sailed across the lake and up a hill in an effort to *get away from* the crowds. So why does Jesus now stay with the crowd?

You know, crowds can be exciting, if they're not wanting something, and did you ever know a crowd that didn't want something? With Jesus there was always a crowd, and so he must also have known that crowds can be dangerous. You can get accustomed to the popularity, to people always looking to you to lead them, to heal them, to feed them. It can feel good to be needed, until one night you're lying in bed and you can't fall asleep on your own.

There's a story that almost every candidate for president tells about being out on the campaign trail. Crisscrossing the country, the days are long and the nights are short. If you make 3 stops a day, you make 4. If you make 4, you make 5. On and off planes and podiums all day long. Glad-handing everyone, trying not to make too much of this person or too little of that one. It can be exhausting, and invariably, at some point, when the candidate has lost track of where they are and which number stop it is, they will turn to some aide or to their spouse and ask the question: who am I and why is what we are doing here important again? I hear this same type of thing can happen to preachers as well.

And maybe this is why Jesus puts the disciples back in the boat and shoves them off back across the lake without him. He'd brought them across the lake and up the hill to get away from the crowds, but the crowds found them anyway, and though at first the disciples didn't want the bother of the crowds, when they discovered they could give the crowd what the crowd wanted, and that the crowd kind of liked them for it, they suddenly didn't mind the crowd so much.

Matthew doesn't record this, but based on what happens next, I can imagine Peter gleaming to Andrew, "Look at them all. They love us." And that was Jesus's cue to get them the hell out of there.

Meanwhile, Jesus, who is seen as having no attachment to crowds, hikes himself further up the hill to be alone and to pray, which is exactly what you would do if you

needed to remember who you are and what's important—you'd talk to your father. So, with no crowds to drown out the silence Jesus just sits and listens. The disciples on the other hand are now out in the middle of the lake rowing against the wind and getting nowhere. Despite the fact that they are fishermen and that they were feeling pretty good about themselves when they got into the boat, that was 9 or 10 hours ago. Now they are overtired, underfed, and they're not sure their sleepy eyes aren't playing tricks on them when they see a figure walking (walking!) across the top of the water and coming towards them. In fear they cry out, it's a ghost! But Jesus assures them, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.

What we are talking about this morning, really, is power and who holds it. We have seen—once again—a great deal made of power recently. In the past 48 hours as a crowd of self-proclaimed white nationalists and neo-Nazis descended upon Charlottesville, Virginia to protest the removal of a historic monument of Robert E. Lee, a symbol of southern pride that many believe is also a symbol of segregation and slavery, they were met by a crowd of anti-protesters. Our newsfeeds and Facebook pages have been overwhelmed with images of power, of power against power, of some people carrying torches, wearing the white hoods of the KKK, and chanting *White Lives Matter* and "We will not be replaced by the Jews," and others carrying signs that read *No to White Supremacy* and *Black Lives Matter*, while clergy stand solidly in the street saying nothing at all. As of this morning, 3 people have died and the Justice Department has been forced to open a Civil Rights investigation. Like you, I am sad. I am angry. I am disheartened. By those who would drive a car into a crowd and come bearing torches. I have no answer to racism except to say that this is not power, at least not by any definition offered us by Jesus.

I think it's worth noting that when the disciples first see someone going by their boat, walking on water, they are afraid without knowing what they are afraid of. Is it Jesus? Is it a ghost? "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Take heart. If we would overcome our fear and be truly powerful, we must dig deep within ourselves and consider the way of our hearts. We must be honest about the prejudices and sins that live there, that we put there, that we allowed others to put there. Because I am a person accustomed to privilege, which means that even if I tell myself I am accustomed to equality, I still have a long-ways to go.

“Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water,” says Peter.

If the first step towards being powerful is to take heart, the second step must be to get out of the boat. To move towards the thing that you fear. To believe that the thing *isn’t a thing at all*, but a person. Not an enemy. Not a ghost. Not an object to be handled. But a person, with a heart just like me and you.

Of course, we can’t see one another if we are wearing hoods. This is the thing that I am beginning to understand about people who carry torches and wear hoods over their heads. They’re not afraid of seeing you. They’re afraid of you seeing them. Sure, they don’t mind being seeing as part of the crowd, because as the old saying goes, there’s strength in numbers. But not always. Sometimes the crowd is only a cover-up, a protection for our fear and cowardice.

There’s a story that Kierkegaard tells in his personal *Journals*. Kierkegaard was a brilliant philosopher who lived in Copenhagen, Denmark in the 1840s, 1850s, and in one entry of his journal he writes about a time when he was out on the town in Copenhagen and he noticed a girl with a basket, leading three musicians down the street, begging for spare change. The musicians were blind. They were trained, classically trained, and they were playing Mozart and Beethoven, and all around them gathered a crowd of people who didn’t have any money. At the same time, going by them in their carriages and chariots, were the people with all the money, heading to the theater for whatever concert was taking place there that evening. Kierkegaard wrote in his *Journal*: “There are two kinds of people in the world; those who are willing but cannot and those who are able, but will not.”

Well, with no disrespect meant to Mr. Kierkegaard, I believe he’s wrong. There are three kinds of people in this world: those who are willing but cannot; those who are able, but will not; and then there’s you. Then there’s you.¹

My friends, I would give you a little power to take with you when you leave here today, to carry back into this world where terrible and beautiful things can happen. It’s not my power. It belongs to the man who walks openly upon the waves, who dares to be seen.

¹ I owe this story about Kierkegaard, as well as my conclusion, to Fred Craddock and his *Collected Sermons*, published by John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2011.

The man who hangs naked upon a cross, dying to save the very ones who put him there.

The man who says, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

Amen.