

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, August 13, 2023**

The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

*on*

1 Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33; Psalm 85:8-13

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## **A Little Faith**

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

How much faith is enough faith?

How much is enough?

Now, some of you might be thinking to yourself: Oh! That's easy!

Faith the size of a mustard seed!

You can move mountains with that, and that's not a terribly large amount!

And...I'm sorry to say, that's not exactly true.

It *is* true that mustard seeds are very small.

But it's not true that Jesus asks us to have a faith the size of a mustard seed.

Somehow we've gotten it into our heads, and it's been in our heads for a while,

So I can't *entirely* blame a rapacious late capitalist tendency to commodify absolutely everything

But we've gotten it into our heads, for some time, that faith is a *thing*. An object.

A measurable sort of expendable sort of spiritual commodity of which we can have

Either more or less depending on a whole host of circumstances, contingencies...

But what Jesus is saying there in Matthew 17:20 isn't that

Faith the size of a mustard seed is so remarkable

It's that faith *as* a mustard seed, faith that does what a mustard seed does

Which is to say: it takes root, it grows, it spreads, that is what is efficacious.

The Kingdom of God is likened to a mustard seed

So there's something here about faith here being related giving access to the Kingdom of God

Faith making present the shape of the Kingdom

The little things revealing the profound things.

The smallest details of a human life being able to reveal the vastness of the love of God.

I mention all this because...it's easy to lose sight of what faith is.

It's easy to get into the habit, for whatever reason,

Of thinking that faith is an object of contemplation

Or the rational content of a particular set of truth claims

Or that the very question, "How much faith is enough" isn't actually ludicrous.

But one of the things our gospel today reveals, as some commentators have pointed out:

Is that the Gospel understands faith not as a noun, but as a verb.

It exists not in the abstract, but in a way of being,

A way of living that is founded on a relationship, on an ongoing and committed practice of trust.

Whether or not there's a little of it or a lot of it isn't so much the issue

As much as: whether or not it's discernible at all in how it is we actually live.  
When Jesus says to Peter, "thou of little faith"  
He's not accusing him of having only a small amount of fuel in the tank  
He's talking about how Peter's fear could so quickly overwhelm and drown his trust.  
But we'll come back to this. First, it's important to take a wider view of the chapter here...

...because the sequence of events in Matthew 14, leading into the Gospel story we just heard  
Is significant—so much so that Matthew reproduces it exactly from Mark chapter 6  
And it's good to be reminded of it.  
First, we get the story of the beheading of John the Baptizer:  
Herod holds a feast on his birthday—Mark includes the detail that the guest list was made up of Officials,  
military advisors, muckety-mucks  
And after his daughter in law dances with what appears to be no small amount of skill, Impressing Herod  
enough to offer her a gift of her choosing  
She, on the advice of her mother, asks for John's head on a platter.  
And, grotesquely, she gets it.  
John's disciples inform Jesus and he goes away to pray and reflect  
But a crowd, about 5,000 strong, follow.  
Jesus has compassion on them, heals those who are ill among them  
And, with only five loaves of coarse bread and two preserved fish  
(a typical small lunch of a laborer), he feeds them, all 5,000 of them,  
Much to everyone's surprise. Wonder, really.  
And then he puts the disciples in a boat, tells them to cross to the farther shore,  
(implicitly suggesting he'll somehow join them there),  
And after dismissing the crowds, he goes to pray alone.  
Now, already, you might've caught the parallel here  
And the importance of this sequence of events:  
Herod's feast of the proud, the wealthy, the official, the powerful  
That ends in blood and violence  
Is contrasted with Jesus' feast of the poor, the wounded, the sick and needy,  
In which all are fed in peace.  
That detail of the people sitting down in the grass is a lovely nod to Shepherd imagery,  
And Shepherd imagery isn't just bucolic and pastoral,  
But is a classic metaphor in Hebrew scripture  
For what the true King is meant to be—the one who feeds, cares for, protects the flock.  
Herod's kingship is contrasted here with Jesus' kingship.  
And the story of Jesus walking on the water is an extension of this contrast:  
The vicious storm besieging the apostles, the waves, the wind, battering their boat  
Tossing it to and fro--the Greek word here can mean: tortured--  
The natural world is roiling with a force and fury that poetically parallels Herod's own brutality  
Water is a ready metaphor in scripture for death, terror, overwhelming violence, chaos  
The tumult of the nations, rapacious human pride  
And just as things are getting their worst, at the darkest hour of the night  
Here is Jesus,  
Not found in the waves' tormented rolls, in the howling wind's buffeting,  
Not found in the screaming storm's obstreperous wail  
Any more than the Lord was in the fire, the earthquake, or the whirlwind for Elijah.  
Here is Jesus—the Word, the still small voice that serenely spoke creation into being  
When the Spirit hovered over the waters of chaos  
Here is Jesus—walking in, through, on, the storm.  
Walking through it to rescue his friends.  
Answering their fear with: be of good cheer, it is I, do not be afraid.

How unlike Herod.  
How unlike the powers of death and destruction, fear and terror  
That we habitually choose to rule and run and ruin us.

It's no wonder that Peter wants to be close to Jesus here.  
Recall the text: he's not asking to walk on water  
He's asking to be where Jesus is.  
Now, very often, we've this image of Peter as this kind of impetuous, almost naïve,  
Occasionally foolish sort of endearingly sincere but largely goofy kind of guy:  
That's not Peter here. That's arguably not quite Peter anywhere. But certainly not here.  
In the midst of this raging storm, Peter sees Jesus, and all he wants is to be where Jesus is.  
This is a profound and bold act of love. A profound act of faith.  
In the midst of the storm, he's seeking Jesus.  
He asks Jesus to call him to him, and Jesus does.  
And Peter gets out of the boat. And walks on water.  
And then...

Peter remembers there's a storm, and his fear of the storm overcomes and overpowers his faith.  
And he discovers very quickly that he himself, of himself, cannot actually walk on water  
And just as the cry for help escapes his lips, Jesus catches him before he sinks, lifts him to safety  
And asks gently, "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?"  
You started so well! Why did you let fear make you waver?  
The word Jesus uses here (translated: thou of little faith)  
Is used four other times in Matthew, and every time  
It's within a context of anxiety or fear:  
Fear of scarcity, fear of danger, fear of not being able to meet the challenges of the moment.  
So often it's precisely that kind of fear that draws us away from faith to a misguided trust  
In our own devices, but that will get us only so far: which is to say, not very far at all.  
As scripture tells us, we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves,  
And that's not because scripture has a dim view of human capacity generally  
But because it understands that who and what we are as human beings  
Is made to be in relationship with God. We are meant for the grace of God to complete us.  
We are meant, in the fullness of our humanity, to be filled with the fullness of God's divinity.  
And it is through faith that we live into that dual fullness  
Which is none other than the reality of the life and love of the God-Man Jesus Christ  
Who enters the storm of violence, sin and death that we made for ourselves  
That we keep inflicting on ourselves  
In order to end it, to exhaust it in the serenity of his deathless life  
And to settle our tempest-tossed hearts on the gentle word of peace he speaks.

Beloved. It's not for nothing that this main part of a church, where you're sitting now  
Is called a Nave. From the Latin word for "ship."  
We're here now, in the ship of the church, surrounded by buffeting winds and waves  
Of bloodshed, violence, hatred, division, prejudice, hunger, desperation, death:  
The storm we call the world, the long, dark repetitive tragedy of unredeemed human history  
And even now, I know that storm's lightning has cracked and crackled in us, through us,  
Has even cracked and crackled our hearts in one way or another.  
We're all storm-touched.  
We're not called, like Peter, to walk on water.  
But we are called to be near Jesus, to be like him.  
And while he is certainly here: in word and sacrament, in the gathered community  
It's not enough just to be near him here.  
We're also called to be near him and like him when we leave this boat.

Because he's out there, too. Yearning to draw us from the blood-dimmed tide  
To still in us and through us the ravages of the world's furious upheaval.  
The beginning of faith, of trust, begun in us or continued in us here: let us not lose it there.  
Let us not let it be overcome and undone by waves of fear, or drowned by pride and self-reliance  
Thinking, Herod-like perhaps,  
That we by our own power could weather or master the storm without drowning.  
So let us get into the practice, the habit, the life, of being held by God,  
Returning in prayer, in the sacraments, in worship, in service,  
To our desire to be near him, and like him, the one who has come near us to be like us,  
Knowing that our desire is a reflection of God's desire for us.  
We might just discover that, through our lived and living faith, the boldness of our love,  
Our lives have become life-rafts that buoy our neighbors,  
As they bear the shape of the Kingdom of the one that "sitteth above the water-flood"  
Enthroned and reigning from the Tree, who says to us even now: "Do not be afraid."

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.