

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 13, 2023

I want you to think back to the time you first began dating. Remember what that was like? Whatever your dating history has been, I'm sure you will agree that it truly was a great feeling to experience a first crush, that time when you first felt attracted to someone and thought about them constantly and wanted to spend all of your time with them. And as young persons, you probably thought that this "puppy-love" phase was how love and relationships would be forever.

And at first, that's how it is, all fun and laughter and goofing around and hours and hours on the phone (or texting or whatever). When looking back at our lives, many of us would consider these to be some of the best times. But with time and maturity comes a harsh realization, that relationships don't simply have a ga-ga phase that lasts forever, but rather have another phase (or phases). This is the phase when responsibility begins to creep in. And arguments happen (and the need to be resolved). And other problems arise that can't be made to go away simply by holding hands or curling up on the couch.

In other words life happens. And for some, the relationship is able to grow and mature and withstand the difficulties in its path. But for others, challenges in relationships can make people wonder if they've made some giant mistake and might not be with the right person.

Put another way, it's easy to "believe" in a relationship when things are going perfectly, exactly as planned, but it's much more difficult to believe in a relationship if it is bumpy and difficult and at times somewhat maddening. The "love" might still be there in a certain sense, but it can be hard to find if it's not wrapped in the exact package we had ordered.

Do we sometimes feel that way about God?

We see some of that going on in today's Gospel passage from Matthew, the well-known "Jesus Walks On Water" story. And make no mistake by thinking this is just another "Look What Jesus Can Do" kind of story. It is so much more than that. It's also our story in at least a couple of ways.

Early in the story we hear how the boat filled with disciples, is a few miles from shore being tossed about by the waves. The disciples catch sight of something or someone approaching them appearing to be walking toward them on the water. They naturally become terrified and the first thing that comes to their minds is,

"It is a ghost."

For some reason, they could not imagine that it was the Lord Jesus himself who was coming to them across the sea. They seem to be completely unprepared for this kind of encounter (but somehow consider a "ghost" to be a reasonable possibility). And yet, think about it for a moment.

They had already seen Jesus do all sorts of incredible things. They had seen him heal the sick. They had seen him feed the five thousand with just five loaves and two fish. And remarkably, they had even been with Jesus in a boat during a storm before, and had seen Jesus calm the storm. In other words, they had seen Jesus do all sorts of "miraculous" things, and yet they couldn't imagine that it was HE who was coming to "save them" once again.

Don't we sometimes do the same? Something happens in our lives which causes us pain or distress or makes us afraid and it becomes all we can focus on. It gets all of our attention, and not in a healthy way, but in an all-consuming kind of way. And what happens? What is often the result?

My guess is that, when sorrow or disappointment or challenges come our way, we can sometimes find ourselves feeling all alone in our troubles,

feeling that we have to “fix” everything through our own efforts, all by ourselves.

What we often fail to recognize or fail to see is the God who is in the midst of all of it, the God who wants to help, the God who wants to calm the storm. So often during troubled times we convince ourselves that God is absent, when in reality he is standing on the waves just an arm’s length away.

And that brings us to our second point. You see, while it is true that Jesus comes to us no matter where we find ourselves, in a good situation or a bad one, in the joys and the sorrows, in faithful behavior or even when we sin, he always invites a response from us, always wants us to make a holy choice, wants us to step out in faith (as Peter did) and journey toward him, trusting that in his arms is the safest place to be.

In other words, God is always coming to us, pursuing us, and he simply asks that we do what we can to come to him, move toward him, journey down the path to the One who wants to calm the storms of our lives. God always does his part, but he asks that we (in faith) do the same. Of course, Peter’s trust begins to waver and he finds himself struggling to stay afloat. Jesus, of course, doesn’t let harm come to him, but rather “saves” him and invites him to believe a little more deeply, trust a little more completely, keep his eyes fixed a little more intently on our God who promises to never abandon us, but rather is with us in our struggles, no matter how painful or frightening or heart-breaking they may be.

And so, today’s Gospel story is not meant to be a “You Better Believe Or Else” kind of story. It’s actually a very loving kind of story. It’s meant to encourage you and me to keep looking for Jesus in the difficulties of life. In the storms of our life. And it’s meant to give us hope that the storms of our lives will never win. Only Jesus wins, every single time.

And so if you feel yourself being crushed by a heavy cross in your life, if you feel it’s becoming more and more difficult to believe that God is

present or that God cares or that God even exists, remember this story. Hopefully, that will help each of us find a little joy, a little peace, a little comfort, an Easter morning for every Good Friday that comes our way.

Let's never forget that God is always with us, and loves us always.