



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 5 – Proper 7 Year B

The Other Side

[RCL]: 1 Samuel 17: (1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49; Psalm 9:9-20; 2 Corinthians 6:1-13; Mark 4:35-41

“Let us go across to the other side,” he says.

Why? What’s over there, on that dark shore, with those menacing black clouds? Why do we have to go to the other side when there’s a storm brewing?

If you’re a Harry Potter fan, you will remember boggarts. A boggart is a shape-shifting creature that takes on the form of your worst fear. Ron’s worst fear was giant spiders. Hermione’s was having a professor tell her she failed. Harry’s boggart was a dementor.

That’s what’s over there - on the other side - boggarts! Things that take the shape of your worst fears. The people you don’t like. The conversations you’d rather avoid. The places you really don’t want to go. They’re all over there, on the other side.

Mark starts this Gospel with, “When evening had come.” - you see, there’s always a growing darkness in these kinds of stories - “When evening had come,” he said to them, “let’s go across to the other side.”

If this were a screenplay instead of scripture, he might have said, “Let’s go into the cellar of this old house,” “Let’s check out this abandoned hospital,” “Let’s head toward that cabin in the woods.” And one of the disciples would turn to the camera and say, “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

Maybe one of them did, just before they stepped onto the boat, because they knew what was on the other side - or they thought they did. Gigantic Philistines are over there. Mad kings. Gentiles. People possessed with legions of demons. Anyone and everyone who doesn’t like them and everyone they don’t like.

“The Others” are over there, on the other side.

Mark is writing for a community grappling with how to include those who are different, those who have historically been enemies, those looked upon as sinners, as outsiders...as dangerous.

Mark’s community is wrestling with questions like:

If Gentiles come into this mostly Jewish community, do they have to be circumcised? Do we *all* have to follow the same dietary laws? How do we accept someone into this community if they don't read scripture the same way we do? How do we accept someone who looks different? Someone who speaks another language? Who doesn't fit our boxes of gender, race, or class? How do we live with these others in our midst? Especially if they have a different understanding of how we do things? What if they are fearful, and violent, and want to do us harm?

Mark's community is in the midst of a voyage into this dark, fearful, and uncharted territory. Sound familiar? It's a journey that is always chaotic. How do we live alongside the Others in our community? Do we change them, or do they change us?

It's a crossing that is never easy, but we make it many, many times in our life. Every crossing feels like sailing in the dark. With all the changes around us, we are sailing in the midst of a storm. How do we cope when the structures and institutions we've always relied on to support us can no longer be counted on? When so many of them are visibly shaking under the strain of so much change?

What do we do when our life situation changes, when the wind shifts, and the seas rage, and the resources - the money, the people, the time - that we've come to rely on are no longer there? What do we do then?

What do we do when the weapons of terror and hate are raised against our brothers and sisters? "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing!?"

Jesus makes this sea crossing to "the other side" with the disciples twice in Mark. Both times are at night; both times there is a storm. This time, Jesus goes with them and sleeps in the stern. The next time, he will make them get in the boats by themselves and go on without him. When they get in trouble, he will walk to them in the midst of the storm.

Each time, he gets a little more impatient with them for simply expecting that he will perform a divine act and relieve them of their fear. Mark seems to be telling us that we have to do some work. That we are to learn how to respond faithfully in these situations, rather than simply reacting out of fear.

We are to find the strength and some kind of inner calm that will allow us to endure, and even *grow*, through these storms. Through faith. Through the faith, the trust, that Christ is here with us in the boat. Christ is with all who suffer. Christ is the peace, and the strength, and the calm that we draw on.

We need to continually seek that inner calm—that courage—because Jesus will keep calling us to go to that other shore.

What or who is on the other side for you? What are your bogarts? We all have them; there are all kinds of "other sides". For the young, growing up and becoming an adult is an other side. For those who are older, retirement is an other side. What will I do, who will I be, if I'm not working? The other side might be getting married, or getting divorced, facing an operation, or saying goodbye.

For the many who are well-off, poverty can be the other side. The lived experience of people of color is the other side for many Americans. The lived experience of so many on the margins is the other side for many others.

For all of us, the other side is ultimately death.

We all have other sides, places that we don't want to go. But that's where Jesus invites us to go. That's where Jesus wants us to go. That's where Jesus is taking us: to the other side, into that foreign territory, to that place we'd rather not go, wherever those "others" are.

Jesus wants us to go there, not because it's our job to change them. Jesus doesn't insist on a night voyage on a stormy sea to make an impact on the ones who live across the sea. He does it to change the ones making the voyage. He does it to change the disciples, to change us.

He does it so that we will experience a change in ourselves, so that we will discover that reservoir of hope, that endless supply of peace and courage, that grace that enables us to keep making these voyages. That enables us to open wide our hearts to any and all who seek Christ, to all who are marginalized, to all whose stories we need to hear in order for us to recognize—and more fully participate in—the spread of God's reign of justice and peace, so that we might one day live together with all our sisters and brothers, in unity.

Amen.

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