

Sermon for August 9, 2020 by Pastor Hanberry "The Weaving of the Future -- Our VISION – Do Not be Afraid" Part 3" Romans 10:5-15 (NRSV) and Matthew 14:22-33 (the Message) TUCC (Ser20-32)

There was a young man studying to be a monk at a monastery in Germany, and he was actually terrified by having to preach; I understand how he feels. He went to the headmaster and said, I will do anything you want me to do; I'll scrub floors, I'll work out in the fields, I'll do anything, but don't ask me to preach. The wise headmaster knew the very thing this man needed to do was to conquer his fears, so he said, tomorrow you are preaching in the chapel. The young man got up before his peers. He was nervous, his mind went blank, and he said, do you know what I'm going to say? They all shook their heads, "no." He said, neither do I. Let's stand for the benediction.

The headmaster was upset. He approached the young man and said, I'm going to give you a second chance. Tomorrow you are preaching again, but no more tricks. The next day the young man got up to speak. He said, "brothers, do you know what I'm going to say?" This time they all nodded their heads, "yes". He said, "since you already know, let's all stand up and have the benediction." Again, the headmaster was upset with him, but he gave him one more chance. So, the young man got up the next day and said, "brothers, do you know what I'm going to say?" Half the heads shook "yes," and half the heads shook "no." He said, "let those who know, tell those who don't. Let's stand for the benediction." (a story from Preaching Plus Online.)

"What's the point of this story," you ask? Sometimes with little faith in ourselves, our fear overcomes us, but we survive, we cope, by having great faith in the community in which we live and breathe and have our being.

Sometimes, the opposite is true. Our arrogance disguised as faith seems bigger than it really is for the situation. Does anyone you know come to mind? For me, the one closest to this truth is Peter in the story of Jesus walking on the water in Matthew's gospel. On the one hand, Peter is famous for his petulance and arrogance and on the other hand he doesn't live up to his pronouncements. Remember, Peter was the disciple who denied Jesus three times...coward in the face of the fear he would be killed along with this master, his Lord. Even so, let's not also forget that

in the midst of the transition from Jesus' time with the disciples and the period after his ascension, Peter was the one who took up the mantle of leadership after Jesus' death and resurrection and continued to lead at Pentecost and beyond. Fear drives Peter into hiding, into isolation—shall we say quarantine—and his boldness that eventually overcomes his fear and he comes out to lead Jesus' movement to its fruition.

Indeed, more than ever, fear has become a part of our lives...It didn't used to be this way; but on second thought, there have always been things and people and situations that frighten us. In these days, in the midst of a Covid 19 crisis, in these days in the midst of great social unrest due to the impact of the systemic racism in our land, we are called to bold action...action that is consistent/congruent with what we say we believe.

This same bold action is called for here at Trinity UCC in the midst of the transition from interim ministry to the preparation of calling a new pastor in the months ahead. The same bold action is called for here at Trinity Church in leading toward creative ways to continue strong worship experiences, even in the time of Covid 19. The same bold action is called for here at Trinity Church in living into the new ID, Mission, Vision and Values Statement just unveiled to the congregation. This Statement is a bold declaration of who God is calling Trinity UCC to be as it Weaves its new Future of the Church.

Paul says in our lesson from Romans 10:5-15: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" The new Mission Statement is good news, the good news Trinity has for the community to which you are committed. How can this be so? Paul says, "*if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*" Indeed, saved to do the work of the high calling in Christ Jesus, to bring into reality the coming reign of God.

This strong statement comes from one Apostle who never seems to have fear. Paul was arrested, hunted by the religious authorities. Even when in jail he sang till the doors of the jail opened. His bold action, his bold commitment, his passion for the Jesus Way, his passion for creating new communities of faith overcame his fear. If fearful, Paul keeps that fear in perspective.

I read a lovely monthly magazine called "The Sun." Published in Chapel Hill, NC., "The Sun" invites its readers to send in letters or short essays for each monthly issue on a one-word theme. In addition to these little essays, there is lovely, poignant poetry, and a long interview with someone doing bold work in the world. In the June, 2020 issue, there is a powerful interview with Jared Seide, titled, "The Power of Story." Seide describes a process he leads and teaches called, "Council." Council is likened to the Native American's "Talking Circles." Council is about "how listening to each other can restore our humanity." Besides this interview, the "Readers Write," section is titled simply, "Fear." Katie Chriest, Erie, Pennsylvania, **writes in this little essay that she fears:** *"That her old car won't pass inspection. That the bread I'm baking for dinner tomorrow won't rise. **That I'll get fat.** That worms will devour the kale at the campus garden I manage. That the student I supervise won't get the grant. That my contract won't be renewed. **That I'll get fat.** That my dad's Parkinson's will decimate his mind. That my mom's arthritis will leave her unable to tend her perennials. That my husband will get hit by a car while riding his bike. **That I'll get fat.**"* She continues with her fears: *"I wake at 3:30 AM, this catalog of fears visiting me again. Then I think of the Bosnian man who, with characteristic dark humor, told me of waiting for bags of rice, sent as aid, to drop from a helicopter, and how he'd added falling food to the long list of things that might kill him. Or the Serbian woman who, when she was little, was whisked out of Belgrade with her brother and taken to her grandparents' farm, where their grandmother kept them from wondering if they'd see their parents again by introducing them to telenovelas. Or the Nigerian couple, now U.S. citizens and residents of my city for nearly as long as me, who worry they'll be pulled over for driving too nice of a car."* Then the fearful writer sums it up this way: *"I'd love to say that these people's stories are enough to silence my self-centered despair, **but I have yet to master the art of putting my fears in perspective.**"*

In our story in Matthew's gospel today, Peter also has trouble keeping his fears in perspective. The disciples are out in a boat, without Jesus, in the middle of the night and a frightening storm comes up and who appears but Jesus, walking on the water,

coming to calm the fears of his disciples. Peter sees this and immediately, most likely without much thought, says, "*Master, if it's really you, call me to come to you on the water.*" And Jesus says, "*Come ahead.*" It's not surprising what happens next.

Peter, ever the bold one, jumps out of the boat. Without thinking much about the danger, he walks toward Jesus. But then, he does the human thing: "*...he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink. He cried, 'Master, save me!'*" And Jesus, ever the compassionate one, "*...reached down and grabbed his hand. Then he said, 'faint-heart, what got into you?'*"

Nothing else is said between Jesus and Peter. Of course, the other disciples are impressed: "*This is it! You are God's Son for sure!*" Perhaps Peter's 'shame' ignored by Jesus is sufficient to allow the disciples to admire what they see in Jesus' expression of power and love.

Did you notice that earlier in the text, as Jesus shows up in the water, he says to the disciples, "*courage, it's me. Don't be afraid.*" That is the good news of this story. That's the good news for us today: "**Courage, it's me. Don't be afraid.**" My friends of Trinity United Church of Christ, in these days of your fears, listen to Jesus one more time: "**Courage, it's me. Don't be afraid.**" Like in the story of the young monk at the beginning of this sermon: those of you with the courage of Jesus, please tell those in your life without courage, overwhelmed by their fears, what Jesus says: "**Courage, it's me. Don't be afraid.**" Indeed, may this be so for you and for me. Amen!