

“Bless His Heart: Stumbling Toward the Kingdom, Chapter 2”

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Sermon: “Bless His Heart: Stumbling Toward the Kingdom, Chapter 2”

Last week we explored the utility of the phrase “Bless your heart” and how it can so often be used in relation to the disciple Peter. I won’t go into it all over again, but if you weren’t here, the gist was simply this:

“Bless your heart” is a versatile piece of the southern English dialect that can express many things depending on how and when you say it. It can express sympathy, approval or, in the way I used it last week, compassion and understanding, as in: “The US Women’s National Team won the World Cup again!¹ All those other teams tried so hard, but *bless their hearts*, they never stood a chance.

But it’s also used to express a certain candor flavored with kindness. Some people call this “tact” which, as a wise sage once opined, “Is the art of telling someone to go to hell in such a way that they enjoy the trip.”²

You see, traditionally Southern culture holds two things in tension: a strong independent streak that does not suffer fools gladly, and an abhorrence of behavior that is perceived to lack grace and gentility. So “bless your heart” may sound kind, but it’s not always; sometimes it translates loosely as, “*You’re not very bright, are you?*”

As we pointed out last week, it’s this last use that seems to apply to Peter so often in the gospels. Peter had a heart in need of blessing. He was one of Jesus’ disciples and a close friend, and while he often got it right, he also sometimes got it wrong; very wrong.

As we talked about last week, it was Peter who was the first of the disciples to proclaim Jesus was the Messiah, but who then tried to tell Jesus how to *be* Messiah. Jesus called Peter both a foundation stone and a stumbling block - bless his heart.

William Barclay writes of Peter that “He was given to acting on impulse and without thinking of what he was doing.”³ My football coach used to call these errors of aggression: mistakes made because you were trying to do the right thing. And errors of aggression aren’t the worst thing in the world. You might have made a mistake, but at least you were trying.

And that’s Peter in a nutshell. He tries hard, but bless his heart, he does make a whole lot of mistakes. What we see in the New Testament is that with Peter, the misunderstanding, the misdirected enthusiasm, the imperfections and flaws; these are not a “bugs,” they’re features. And yet he is one of Jesus’ greatest disciples.

This month were delving into Peter’s experience of discipleship as we try to learn from him what it means for us to follow in that same path, while hopefully learning from his mistakes.

This week we see Peter at his most bold *and* his most frail. Listen for the word of the Lord as it comes to us from Matthew 14:22-33.

Matthew 14:22-33 (NRSV)

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” ²⁸Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” ²⁹He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Before we talk about Peter, I want to point out something else here that is interesting:

The disciples are on a journey to which Jesus invited them. They are in the boat struggling against the wind and waves to cross the lake because Jesus called them to that journey. And when the disciples are struggling the most - when the journey has become most difficult - that is when Jesus comes to them. That is when Jesus is stronger than the things that are holding them back. That is when Jesus saves them.

The boat is a lovely metaphor for the church and we are all in this boat, taking this journey together, because Jesus has invited us. And when the church faces struggles, whether from the culture around us or from conflict within, we draw comfort from our faith that when our journey is at its most difficult, Jesus is with us.

We draw strength from Jesus who walks beside us, guiding us, showing us the way. There is no reason to fear. Jesus is stronger than the things that threaten to overwhelm us. That is certainly good news. But we're not quite ready to go home just yet because, I want to make sure we spend some time with our friend Peter.

Peter trusts Jesus. That's why he can attempt the impossible. He sees Jesus walking on the water towards him and the disciples and he wants to walk out there with Jesus, too. He wants to go where Jesus goes and do what Jesus does. He is accepting the responsibility of being Jesus' disciple. But, he can only do that because he trusts Jesus completely.

Good for Peter! (Bless his heart!)

But then the author tells us, after he gets out of the boat, and takes those first steps on water, he notices the "strong wind" blowing around him. Now Peter had been in the boat for some time. In verse 24 we learn that the disciples are still far from their destination because their boat had been "battered by the waves" and "the wind was against them."

Their journey thus far had been a windy one - their sails are driven by the wind. The waves and spray that batter their boat have been whipped up by the wind. When Peter and Jesus speak, they must do so over the sound of that wind. The wind is ever present. How could he not notice it? Yes, Peter is aware of the wind. As a fisherman by trade he knows to watch wind and wave and current as a matter of personal safety. It would be negligent and foolhardy to ignore the conditions of the sea around him.

But what Peter cannot notice until he actually leaves the relative safety of the boat, is what that wind looks, and feels, and sounds like from "out there," on the water. Once he steps over the side of the boat into the water everything looks very different.

It's easy to look at a thing from the outside and say, "Hey, I can do that. It doesn't look so hard." But then things start to look very different once you're in the middle of them. There are lots of experiences for which there is a significant gap between watching them being done and doing them yourself: Cooking a four-course meal, driving a car in rush-hour traffic, being the parent of a toddler, solving middle school math problems.

And trying to outrun a wild animal.

The running of the bulls has been going on in Pamplona, Spain since last weekend and ends today. Every year hundreds of people flock to this town in Northern Spain to channel their inner Ernest Hemingway and be chased by thundering herds of raging bulls down narrow streets in search of excitement and glory. One American on just such a quest nearly died this week when a bull gored him in the neck as he was trying to take a selfie.⁴ Bless his heart.

Now, I'm sure that for some folks, racing bulls down a narrow street with a thousand other strangers cheering you on looks like a good idea from the outside looking in. These are folks who probably think "Heck, I can outrun a cow." Maybe they even think of the old joke that says, "I don't have to outrun the bull; I just have to outrun the guy next to me." Ha-ha. But then things start to look very different once you're there in Spain and the gates open and there are actually several hundred tons of angry steer chasing you down.

Sometimes things look easy from the outside, but once you get in the middle of them, they get a lot more challenging and thus, a lot more frightening. And in that moment, you have a choice: quit or keep going, to trust or to turn tail, to swim for it - or sink.

Peter faced such a moment in this story. His problem wasn't that he hadn't noticed the wind before he left the boat and started walking toward Jesus. It's that he didn't recognize how real and dangerous the wind actually was until he got out in the middle of it. Bless his heart.

And that can be like living the life of a disciple. Sitting here in this church, in this beautiful structure of wood and stone and stained glass, singing familiar hymns, joyfully worshipping God, sharing punch and cookies with familiar friends and fellow disciples - this is actually pretty easy and attractive, and comfortable. Accepting God's grace and unconditional love and resting secure in the knowledge of our personal salvation is easy and attractive.

Being a disciple though, is hard. And as disciples, we are called out of this comfortable place (both literally and figuratively comfortable) out into the world where people can be harder to get along with, where there is need and conflict and hatred, where the wind howls louder and where God doesn't always feel as close. And when we're in the middle of trying

our best, the challenges and distractions can be too much. They can tear our attention away from the one who invites us to join him on the journey.

And that's where we get to the really good part of the story. As Peter gets an up-close look at the wind from inside the storm, his courage fails him and he begins to sink. Bless his heart. But what does he do? He turns to Jesus. He calls for help, "Lord, save me!" he cries. And Jesus reaches out to him, grabs him by the collar, and pulls him back to the relative safety of the boat. When Peter begins to sink, when his courage fails, even though his faith is apparently not strong enough to do what Jesus does, he stills turns to Jesus for help - and Jesus is there. Even though Peter's faith failed him, *Jesus is there!*

Being a disciple is hard. Life is hard. Sometimes, like Peter, we are up to the challenge. And sometimes, like Peter, we are not. Bless our hearts. But Jesus is constant. Jesus is ever present. And when we turn to Jesus for guidance, for comfort, for support, for rescue, Jesus is there.

There's one last thing I've always liked about this story; it's a small detail that sometimes people miss. We remember that Jesus comes to the disciples as they struggle against the wind and waves. He rescues Peter in the midst of a gale. *But it is not until Jesus has led Peter back into the safety of the boat that the storm falls silent.*

Jesus never said we wouldn't have to face storms, just that he would be with us to help us through them. Jesus never promises that the life of a disciple will be a life free from trial, or distress, or fear, or pain. But he does promise we will never have to face those things alone. The question is do we trust that promise?

There's an old saying. I don't remember who said it or where it came from, but I believe it and it has sustained me since my childhood: "The sheep in the shepherds arms looks only into the eyes of the shepherd and not to the wolves around it seeking to do it harm."

When life is hard, we turn to Jesus. When grief threatens to overwhelm, when anger seems insurmountable, when fear and pain and sadness seem never ending, we turn to Jesus. The life of the disciple will be challenging and frightening sometimes, but if we trust in the one who calls us to that journey and who walks it beside us, we can make it, even though we will likely stumble along the way. Bless our hearts.

Peter stumbled - a lot.

We like to think that following Jesus is a smooth trip. It is not. We sometimes hold ourselves to a standard where missteps are not allowed; they are. We lift-up Peter as a hero who got it right every time; he didn't. But Jesus is always present, always faithful, always forgiving, always straightening us out and sending us back in the right direction.

And we thank God for that.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Goff, Steven and Emily Giambalvo. "U.S. wins World Cup with a final four-star performance." Washington Post, 7 July 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2019/07/07/uswnt-netherlands-world-cup-final.

² "A Diplomat Is a Person Who Can Tell You to Go To Hell in Such a Tactful Way That You'll Look Forward with Pleasure To Making the Trip – Quote Investigator." 10 July 2019, quoteinvestigator.com/2018/04/03/diplomat.

³ Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. 106. Print. The Daily Study Bible Ser.

⁴ "Run-In with Pamplona Bull Made American 'Fear for My Life'." N. Y. Times, 14 July 2019, www.nytimes.com/aponline/2019/07/08/world/europe/ap-eu-spain-running-of-the-bulls.html.