

Homily for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I have a quote sitting right by my computer over in the parish offices. It says, “Jesus, reaching out to grasp Peter’s sinking hand, symbolizes Jesus’ compassion to someone who swings back and forth like a pendulum between boisterous bravado and cringing fear”. I liked that quote so much that I decided to Google it to see where I got it from. Turns out, it’s part of a larger poem written by a now-deceased priest of the Diocese of Harrisburg, Fr. Ronald Haney, who used to write for the diocesan newspaper, *The Catholic Witness*. If you knew Fr. Haney, you knew the firecracker he was! Anyway, his poem entitled, *Power*, goes like this:

Walking on water seems
as useless as making
clay pigeons and causing
them to wing off into
the azure beclouded skies.

But the inspired writer,
like the Carpenter
he is describing,
is hammering together
symbols of interpretation.

Water is the symbol of evil
and Jesus walking on the water
symbolizes his domination
over the engulfing waves of evil.

Jesus, reaching out to grasp
Peter’s sinking hand,
symbolizes Jesus’ compassion
to someone who swings
back and forth like a pendulum
between boisterous bravado
and cringing fear.

Before reading that poem, I never even thought to ask myself why Jesus would have chosen walking on water as a type of miracle. And not just one miracle, but two: Jesus walking on the water, and enabling Peter to do the same! But in light of this poem, I think I’ve caught a glimpse of what might have been Jesus’ motivation.

First, it's important to understand the stormy sea as the Israelites viewed it – a great abyss and a manifestation of evil. They remembered the great flood of Noah's time, which was brought on by the wickedness of the people. And certainly, the tides of life can bring all kinds of changing conditions in a heartbeat from a calm, glassy reflection to turbulent waters that could capsize a boat. In today's Gospel, Jesus came walking on the waters in the very worst of conditions – the boat with the disciples in it being tossed about by the waves because of very strong winds. Jesus walking on these waters shows that evil has no authority over Him whatsoever. And then when Jesus later calms the winds down, He shows that He has authority over sin and dominion over all.

As the Son of God, Jesus knew He had this power, but He also wanted Peter to know and experience it too. Jesus wanted Peter to understand that in Him – and only with His help – he too could overcome the evil that would frequently confront him in life. And so Peter courageously got out of that boat with his eyes confidently fixed on Jesus. But, as soon as he started to let fear, worry, and doubt creep in, he began to sink, and cried out to Jesus to save him! Yes, Peter certainly is that pendulum that swings back and forth between boisterous bravado and cringing fear.

But, how much are we just like Peter! How much do we think that we can nix our bad habits only to fall back into them soon enough! Or how much do we think we're good people only to turn around and mess up bad ourselves! The truth is that temptation can be very compelling, and evil very enticing. And if the evil one can get us to focus on anything other than God, who is the only source of grace and love, then we're sunk. Just like Peter, who turned his focus from Jesus to the problems at hand, so too can the evil one tempt us down that path of dwelling on all the what ifs of life. "What if I make the wrong decision?" "What if my burdens and what I'm going through are more than I can handle?" "What if they don't like me?"

But how much does Jesus want us to keep our eyes fixed on Him even as we tip-toe through the hidden land mines of life. Jesus, like a parent with outstretched arms, says to us, "WE can do it – you and I together."

But to take this from poetry and theology to reality, we have to concretely experience in our everyday lives and choices that Jesus really is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the only way to get from where we are to where He is – heaven. He is the only way to overcome sin. He is the only way to real and lasting peace. And the more we keep focused on Him and call out to Him – really, call out to Him throughout the day – is the degree that we will walk on water too. God bless you.