

John Sampson
"First Steps"
Text: Matthew 14:22 - 33
Preached at KVCC
August 13, 2017

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

Where is Jesus?

It's a simple question.

And it's a question that haunts many of us. As followers of Jesus is it enough to know that our teacher lived so many years ago? Is it enough to have the teachings of the one we call the Christ recorded in our scriptures, scriptures we can read and meditate on any time we wish?

Or as followers of Jesus do we thirst for his presence in our lives?

Do we hunger for an experience of his love that is palpable and visceral?

Where is our teacher today?

The answer we hear this morning from the authors of Matthew is an irony.

They tell us that Jesus is where he has always been. He is in the place we would least expect to meet him. And perhaps that is why we ask the question about his location because we are almost always looking in the wrong place to find him.

Where is the one called the Prince of Peace?

Look, and see.

He is not in the boat with us. He is not in a place of safety sitting by our side. He is not sitting among friends and followers and disciples.

He is out there in the middle of the Chaos, surrounded by a raging sea, and gale force winds.

Where is the one called the Son of God?

This morning I believe he is not sitting in a nice white church, singing beautiful hymns and hearing sermons that uphold the status quo. He is not where we might expect to find him.

This morning I believe he is out in the chaos; he is out on the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia. He is out in the place where we are tearing ourselves apart in a toxic mixture of white supremacy, violence, fear and anger.

Look. Can you see him there?

For some of us it may be hard to make out the figure of Jesus standing between the White Nationalists and the members of the Black Lives Matter movement as they struggle against each other on the campus of the University of Virginia. For some of us it may be hard to wrap our minds around the fact that Jesus would be found in the collision of newly minted Confederate flags and the dismantling of a statue of the southern general Robert E. Lee, based on a petition started by an African-American high school. It may be hard to see among the bodies shattered by a car whose driver was bent on killing and maiming those holding a different vision of what it means to call ourselves the United States of America that Jesus, and his shattered body, stood there among the dead and injured.

And yet our reading from Matthew invites us to look into the very fulcrum of our deepest anxieties and hatreds, into the violence and confusion of our lives, into the maelstrom of our nation's racial chaos to see the one we have been looking for. That is the place, we are told, where we will find the man who we are promised will bring us salvation.

But to witness Jesus' presence in the chaos of Charlottesville is only the beginning. Because above the Neo-Nazi chants of "You will not replace us!" and the presidential tweets of "There is no place for this kind of violence," Jesus speaks. And when he speaks he is addressing us here, this morning, in these pews.

He says: "Come! Leave the safety and security of your boat and join me out here in the storm. Join me in the midst of the chaos because this is where I AM. Out here in the raging sea, out here on the streets set ablaze, out here in the violence of brother against

brother, and sister against sister this is where you will meet me.

This is where I AM.”

It’s a cliché, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true, that every journey begins with a first step. But our journey, as disciples, to meet Jesus who is standing in the midst of the chaos of places like Charlottesville, doesn’t just start with a first step. The authors of Matthew tell us that our journey starts with a miracle, with an event so unexpected that it seems almost like it is impossible. Because the first step on our journey doesn’t begin with our feet. It begins with our collective heart.

There is a boat that was built centuries ago on the shores of this land, among its valleys and within the shadows of its mountain peaks. It is the boat of white supremacy. It is the boat that has given one race, the white Euro-American race, a sense of comfort and privilege, a sense of being the measure against which all other races

should be compared and judged, a sense of entitlement to all of the resources and advantages of our society. I call it a boat because it is the ideology that gives many white Americans on the streets of Charlottesville, and across our country, a feeling of security, and a feeling of safety. White supremacy is a belief system that its adherents can cling to in the face of the uncertainty of our current economic situation, and a general movement to a more inclusive and multivalent society.

But white supremacy is more than this. It is a way of thinking and a set of assumptions that influences every aspect of our social, political, economic and cultural architecture. It is not the sole property of one person, or one party, or one region. It is, in the words of James Cone, the founder of black liberation theology, America's original sin. White supremacy's invisible hand can be seen in the fact that 27.4% of African Americans live in poverty as opposed to 9.9% of whites. Its influence can be felt in the fact that

according to the CDC HIV incidence among blacks is 8 times higher than whites. Its power can be seen in the fact that there are only 4 black CEOs among the 500 largest companies in the US. Although it would be easy to look at the streets of Charlottesville and say that white supremacy is a perspective held by others, all white Americans benefit from its ongoing power within our society.

When we see Jesus standing out in the midst of the chaos of Charlottesville and when we hear him say, "Come!" the question he is inviting us to ask ourselves, as individuals, and as a nation, the question that involves a miraculous transformation of our American heart, is whether or not we will be willing to leave the boat of white supremacy that impacts all of us, even if we are not personally responsible for its creation and implementation. Because the fight for racial equality in this country is not just the fight of African Americans, not just the fight of Hispanic Americans, not just the fight of Asian Americans. It is also the fight of white Euro-Americans to

seek out and dismantle the places where white supremacy is still active and influential throughout our society, and perhaps also within the deepest recesses of our hearts and minds.

Where is the son of Mary this morning?

He isn't to be found in the safety of our nation's racist systems. He is to be found out in the chaos of our streets, in our political debates, and in the advocacy of those working to make our nation a more just and equitable society. For Jesus was born among the most marginalized, the poorest, the least powerful so that he could deliver a message of hope that they were remembered by God, and not only remembered, but blessed.

Our journey to meet Jesus out in a world set on fire by racial violence begins with the miraculous transformation of our collective heart. And I see that transformation here in this congregation. I see

members and friends of this church working out beyond these walls with local organizations doing the hard and ongoing work for racial justice here in the Adirondacks and beyond. I see members and friends of this congregation working for reform within our system of mass incarceration that disproportionately impacts communities of color. I see members and friends of this church supporting non-white families within this community work towards, and achieve, economic independence and their desire for citizenship. We are a community that has heard Jesus call to us, and we are a community that has responded.

Yet this morning's reading resists an overly optimistic interpretation of how easy the work of transformation, for our nation, and for ourselves, will be. It pushes back on the idea that miracles are quick and complete. It forces us to reflect soberly on the hope that our 400-year-old system of American racism can be overcome in a generation or two.

We are told that Peter underwent a change of heart, and took his first miraculous steps towards Jesus. America too has undergone a deep and profound change of heart. As a nation we abolished slavery, we overturned the legal systems that kept the races segregated in schools, we implemented the Civil Rights Acts of the 60s and the Voting Rights Act. But just as Peter almost made it to Jesus the wind frightened him and he began to sink. To watch that driver intentionally ram his car into the peaceful protestors walking the streets of Charlottesville is to be buffeted by a wind that can make us lose faith that we, as a society, may ever see full racial equality attained in this country. To see dozens of white supremacists hold a torch lit rally at the campus of the University of Virginia and not feel the need to wear hoods, because they feel emboldened and proud enough to show their faces to the world is to be buffeted by a wind that can make us lose faith that racial hatred can ever be rooted out of our nation. Although the authors of

Matthew write about the miracles of discipleship, they actually give us an unfortunately accurate picture that the work of following Jesus is filled with setbacks, failings and moments where faith is tested, and may be lost. In the story of Peter miraculously walking across the water only to be frightened and sink beneath the roaring waves we see an echo of America's fitful journey through the evil of white supremacy, and its chaotic repercussions.

Where is our teacher this morning?

He is here, right next to us. He hasn't gotten in the boat with us, because that's no longer where we are. We've moved out over the waves, out into the raging sea to meet him. But he is here with us, reaching down and giving us his hand, when the anger and the frustration, when the tears and the hopelessness have dragged us down below the waves and we feel like we can't go on, that the road to racial justice and equality is just too hard and may seem like too

much of a dream to attain. He is the strength and the message, that ghost or spirit that whispers into our ear: "Why have you lost faith? Get up, because there is still so much work to be done. Get up. Maybe not today, or tomorrow. But get up again, because I need you to be my voice in this world, in this fight. Get up again, because I need you to be my hands working for love and justice. Get up again because I need you to be my marching feet that resist the safety and complacency of white supremacy. Get up again because your brothers and sisters need you! Don't lose faith, because I will always be here to reach down when you have fallen, and I will always be here to help you get up again."

AMEN.