

*A sermon given on Sunday, August 7, 2011
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Gary Mitchener*

This poem by Mary Oliver is called "The Journey"

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice--
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save. _

So what keeps US from making that journey, the journey to save the only life we CAN save, the journey from merely trying to live UP to OTHER people's expectations, to living IN to our TRUE self? What keeps us stuck in the boat when we could be walking on water? Where do we find within ourselves that kind of courage, that kind of faith?

In this morning's Gospel Jesus says to Simon Peter, "O you of LITTLE FAITH," which seems a little unfair since Peter has just jumped into the middle of a raging storm in order to come to Jesus! But later in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says all you NEED is faith the size of a tiny mustard seed. So it must be that QUANTITY of faith is not the issue; it must be the QUALITY and where you PLACE your faith that matters.

Let's look at that word "faith." What comes to mind? Blind faith? Trying to whip up a feeling to convince yourself you believe something you really don't? Crossing your fingers when you say parts of the Creed?

The Creed. "Credo in unum deum" "I BELIEVE in one God," at least that's how we usually translate "credo:" I believe. But it doesn't take much poking around in a dictionary, into the etymology of 'credo,' to get a whole different understanding. It seems the Latin 'credo' comes from the Indo-European root "cred" which means HEART, which puts faith in a totally different light! So instead of giving INTELLECTUAL assent to a whole list of propositions, or having to sign off on a list of statements ABOUT God or Jesus, the root of the word means "where we place our heart." So therefore our deep trust and our allegiance, our willingness to FOLLOW Jesus, comes out of that trust, comes out of where we place our heart.

So, to say "Jesus is Lord" (which was the first creed of the early Church) is to stand alongside Simon Peter as he steps out of the boat and says, "Jesus, I'm not at all sure where you're leading, but one thing I DO know: I'd rather be DROWNING with you than be crowned by anyone else who CLAIMS to be lord." "Drowning," in churchy language, is being baptized, being lowered, sinking into that watery tomb in order to be raised up again, resurrected with Christ, the one in whom I have chosen to place my heart.

Psalms 18 begins "I love you God; you make me strong." Doesn't that sound like a love-song to you, a song about where David the shepherd/king placed his heart? So if the Psalms can be seen as love-songs, why can't love-songs be seen as present-day Psalms?

Take an old Beatles' song, "Love you, yeah, yeah, yeah" and just capitalize the first letter of the word 'you' as a way of addressing the DIVINE Lover, and—poof--we've turned it into a love-song to God, a kind of psalm.

Or that wonderful old Elvis Presley song, imagine Simon Peter singing it as he walks across the water to Jesus, (just happens to have his guitar with him), "Take my hand, take my whole life too, for I can't help falling in love with YOU."

So, having said all that, having SUNG all that, what is it that keeps us STUCK in the boat, trying to play it safe, instead of taking a chance of walking on water? We all have areas of our life where we feel stuck; it might be in our marriage, our job, our health, our relationships, it might be just getting through the day, not to mention getting through the long night. What would walking on water look like for you? Maybe like dreaming the "impossible dream?" Maybe the FIRST step would be just to ALLOW yourself to dream AGAIN, to let go of your tired jaded cynicism. It's not too late, you know? (to quote Yogi Berra, "it ain't over till it's over.")

So, now that you know it's NOT essentially a matter of the INTELLECT that's keeping you in the boat, but it's about your HEART. It's about allowing your heart to fall in love with your life and therefore to be stretched, made a little larger.

The poet e.e.cummings says "unless you love someone, nothing else makes any sense." And, to some degree, the RESULTS, the way it might turn out, whether you sink or swim, don't even ultimately matter. What matters is that you love enough to take a chance. What matters is your deciding that THIS DAY you know what you have to do, and you do it, you take the first step on that journey determined to do the only thing you CAN do, to save the only life you CAN save.