

August 7, 2011
Pentecost 8, Proper 14, Year A
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Remember at the beginning of last week's episode, Jesus wanted to be alone and pray, but the crowd pursued him, wouldn't leave him alone, and Jesus felt compassion for them and then healed them and fed them. This week's gospel picks up just where last week's ended, and today Jesus gets some time to be alone, to rest, to pray.

What might have been happening to Jesus when he was praying? Many people who spend a lot of time in prayer or meditation as Jesus did report that the commotion and distractions and demands of the world fade and a deeper, broader awareness emerges; our ego becomes less intense, our identity more expansive, less brittle; our sense of time and space less confined, even a sensation of eternity and infinite space. There's a sense of oneness with creation, a deep connection to what's real.

Many researchers now think that prayer re-shapes and re-wires our brains.¹ Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist at University of Pennsylvania, has compared mystical feelings with brain physiology. He says that our parietal lobes, the part of the brain that orients us in the world, defines the boundaries of our bodies, become less active in prayer. So prayer can give us a greater sense of oneness, of stronger connection to other people.

A University of Wisconsin neuroscientist, Richard Davidson says, "You can sculpt your brain just as you'd sculpt your muscles if you went to the gym. Our brains are continuously being sculpted, whether you like it or not, wittingly or unwittingly." In his research scanning the brains of people who pray a lot, he said that when it comes to things like attention and compassion, their brains are as finely tuned as a late-model Porsche.

Alas, I doubt that my prayer life has led to Porsche caliber performance, but I find encouragement in Davidson's study that shows "just two months' practice [of prayer] among rank amateurs led to a systemic change in both the brain as well as the immune system in more positive directions." Science is providing more evidence that prayer helps us become more like the people we want to be, more like what God invites to be.

The gospels tell us that Jesus was often moved by compassion, but active compassion does not necessarily mean eliminating the cause of someone's distress. Indeed, in today's gospel, Jesus is the cause of distress. There's a big

storm, but most of the disciples were fishermen. They were used to storms on the water. What distressed them was to see Jesus coming to them walking on water. They thought Jesus was a ghost.

This miracle, as with all of his miracles, tells us something about the identity of Jesus. In the Old Testament, water, the deep, the sea – these represent chaos, darkness, death, the home of Leviathan, of evil. In Genesis, it's opposed to God's creative activity. The Spirit of God moved over the waters. God overcomes the formless, dark deep to create form, order, light. Jesus walking on the waves shows he overcomes chaos and evil and oblivion.

Jesus walking on the sea frightens the disciples. They panic, and a bunch of people panicking together is much worse than one person alone. We know how emotions are contagious, that if you spend much time with a bunch of hopeful, positive people, you're more likely to be hopeful and positive. If you spend a lot of time with angry people, you're likely to be angry more. We absorb the feelings, the attitudes, the behavior, even the values of those we're around – be it in a momentary instant like today's gospel, or over periods of time. It's hard for us to break from the pack.

Think of the story of the golden calf. (Ex 32) Israel has escaped from Egypt and is wandering in the desert. Moses took an extended stay on the mountaintop, praying, talking to God. With Moses away, the people got anxious. Moses had left Aaron in charge, and the people demanded that Aaron make them a golden calf, an image of God to comfort them. Aaron knew it was wrong, but he caved. Their distress distressed him. He couldn't be calm in their anguish so he tried to make them happy, content. He tried to relieve their anxiety by giving them what they wanted. Pontius Pilate tried the same trick. Of course, it doesn't work. It produces only temporary relief.

Think about yourself, how quickly we try to avoid distraught people or situations where we might have disagreement or conflict with someone else. When someone is upset – frightened, sad, angry, often I feel myself taking on their troubles, carrying it, kind of being manipulated by their distress. Part of me wants to fix the problem. I want to be, in Mick Jagger's words, your knight in shining armor coming to your emotional rescue.

The Israelites were upset, and Aaron wanted to rescue them. He made peace by sacrificing his principles, his priorities. But when Moses returned from the mountain, he saw the idol, he filled with rage, and he destroyed the golden calf. We always think of Moses as beloved, but he wasn't loved when he broke up the golden calf party. Many hated him for it. He stood up for what he believed in. Just as it sometimes takes only one upset person in a room to stop all progress, one person to upset everyone else, so it sometimes takes only one person to say we don't have to be like this.

In today's gospel, Peter's this guy. He's cowering with all the other disciples in the boat, but he's the one who's willing to take a risk to break the fear. Jesus doesn't exist to protect us from distress. He's not a pacifier. For Jesus, leadership is not about relieving distress and ensuring tranquility. When things aren't going the way we want, when we're upset, it doesn't mean that God doesn't care, it doesn't mean God is opposed to us.

Jesus calls Peter out into the waves. "Come into the realm of chaos and evil and darkness. Come into the turmoil where there's pain and hurt. I will sustain you." It's not: "I'm going to keep you safe and cozy." Rather, this is the Jesus who tells us, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

Everyone in the boat is paralyzed with fear, and Peter breaks free. He jumps out of the security of the boat – a fraught security, but a security nonetheless because it's what he knows. The emotions of those around him don't hold him back. Each of us has some of that inside. Peter accesses that part of himself that allows him to step into the unknown.

We can all do that. We have all done that. When we look back over our lives, so often it's when we've put ourselves on the line, broken from the pack, accepted some discomfort, endured some stress and chaos, accepted some vulnerability, these are the situations where we learn and grow, where we become something new, where God works.

Even terrible experiences can be full of grace. Viktor Frankl tells a story, a poem he calls it, of a young woman he met in a Nazi concentration camp. He wrote:

This young woman knew that she would die in the next few days. But when I talked to her she was cheerful in spite of this knowledge. "I am grateful that fate has hit me so hard," she told me. "In my former life I was spoiled and did not take spiritual accomplishments seriously." [As she lay dying, she could see through a small window in her hut just one branch of a chestnut tree, and on the branch were two blossoms. She said the tree spoke to her:] "It said to me, 'I am here—I am here—I am life, eternal life.'"²

On her deathbed under the most denigrating circumstances of a Nazi camp, there was healing and spiritual growth. She experienced grace. Whenever, wherever there's difficulty, there's also opportunity.

Today, Peter seized the opportunity, and Peter was okay in the turbulence and chaos until he stopped focusing on Jesus. What are the things you find distracting your focus on Jesus? I watched the stock market tumble last Thursday and got anxious, but I noticed on that day when I started reading the gospel and thinking about Jesus, I felt hope and strength – not nervousness. I

re-connected to the truth that the Dow could drop all the way to 1,000, and I'd be okay. My life could be much different, and even if I'm standing in a Depression era soup line, I'd be okay.

Many things also distract us from Jesus. I find warring in myself desires for recognition, for wealth, for comfort, for security, for certainty, for stability. These distractions, and more, tempt all of us, both as individuals, and as a Christian community; they tempt families and nations.

When he got distracted, Peter started sinking, and Jesus reached out and caught him, plucked Peter out of darkness, and said, "O man of little faith, why didn't you trust me alone?" It may sound to us as if Jesus is criticizing Peter, rebuking him, almost mocking Peter for not having enough faith.

I bet that's the wrong way to understand it. Jesus is a man of compassion. Here's the good news: Jesus has a smile on his face when he calls Peter a man of little faith, a smile of pride and pleasure in Peter who has the guts to jump out of the secure and fearful boat and into turbulent sea of life. This is a man becoming something new. It's beautiful to behold.

Once when Jesus healed an epileptic boy, Jesus told the crowd, "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move." (Mt 17:20) The mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds - just that much faith is what's needed for you and for me to grow into what God desires.

Peter has little faith, and his faith transforms him, and it influences all the disciples as well. At the end of today's gospel, the disciples are no longer quivering in fear. They're worshipping Jesus. Everyone has changed in today's gospel. Everyone is learning to trust Jesus. That's what we're doing together.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Barbara Bradley Haggerty, "The Science of Spirituality: Prayer May Reshape Your Brain ... And Your Reality," NPR, May 24, 2009.

² Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Pocket Books, Beacon Press edition (1959), p.90.