

[ON A STOOL - SOUNDS OF A STORM] Whoa! This is too much! Man, the wind is so strong, the waves are so high, there's no way that we can make it to the other side! I don't even know if we can make it back to Galilee! I can't believe that Jesus would send us out here alone like this! At least last time we went in the boat to the Gentiles, Jesus was with us! He was dead asleep in the middle of the storm, and he woke up to calm it for us, just by talking to it! But now, he's nowhere to be seen! This just isn't fair!

I mean, it's not as if we're not trying to be the best disciples we can be. We had just finished feeding five thousand families from a few loaves of bread and fishes, and no sooner had we finished, Jesus makes us get into the boat to go to the Gentiles, across the lake! We all saw that it was going to be a bad night for sailing, and he MADE us get into the boat - and then took off to pray! Can you imagine that? He MADE us get into the boat! What was he thinking? We're doing the best we can, but I don't see how we're going to make it. We have faith, we love Jesus, but we need something more, we -

Hey wait, Peter!! What are you doing! Man overboard, man overboard! This is crazy, you're going to drown, you're - oh, my goodness, he's walking on the water! How can that be!? You know, Peter's been a quiet guy, who would have thought that he'd do something like this? He's - he's not alone out there! It's - it's Jesus! Jesus is coming towards us! Peter is walking towards him on the water! This is impossible! He's just a fisherman, for heaven's sake! How could he possibly - oh, no, he's starting to sink! Help him, Jesus, help him, please! Save him! Save us! Jesus, please save us, Jeeeesuuuusss!

[SHIFT TO LECTERN] Would you pray with me, please. [PRAYER] A fragile boat, made of rough wood, with a wisp of a sail, headed across the Sea of Galilee one night. Twelve people, maybe more, were in it, hoping to make landfall eight miles away. Eight miles in a tiny open boat, in the middle of the night, with winds and waves all around. Their leader, Jesus, made them get into the boat.

Let me repeat that, so that we can think about it for a moment, and feel what it really means. Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus made his disciples get into the boat. They were exhausted from following Jesus. Their down-time disappeared when Jesus

asked his disciples to turn two fish and five loaves of bread into a feast for five thousand families, a miracle by any measure, but Jesus had asked his disciples to lead others to make the miracle happen. The disciples were excited, joyful, full of faith, but they were still just human beings, at the end of a long day. As Jesus stayed behind to send the crowds away, immediately he sent his disciples on a dangerous and hard new mission. Jesus knew that his disciples needed this mission, not because of who they were, but because of what they were starting to become as people of faith.

And so, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat. Jesus knew that they were tired, he saw the sky over the lake; he knew what it meant. It would be a tough journey. It would be a journey where his disciples would need every last ounce of energy and faith to make it there safely. The wind was against them, nothing would be easy about getting there. And when they got there, they would be among strangers, people with traditions far different from their own. Nothing would be easy when they got there, too.

Jesus made his disciples get into the boat, because, as Matthew's gospel shows us, again and again, disciples are made, not born. For those of us fortunate enough to have been born into this church and other churches, you might have a sense that Christian discipleship was something that you were born into. And certainly we can all be thankful that we have had Christians in our families and in our churches who have nurtured us, cared for us, and given a sense of connection to this church and God's church around the world, but let me repeat: Matthew's gospel shows us, again and again, that disciples are made, not born.

Matthew shows us, from the opening chapters of his gospel, that the disciples of Jesus had a lot to learn from Jesus, a lot to believe about Jesus, a lot to understand about Jesus, and a lot to understand about how they, as followers of Jesus, needed to work together to become God's people in the image of Jesus. Jesus chose his disciples, began to give them missions, and they began to grow in faith and in service to God. But they were still not ready to be disciples of the Son of God. They were still not ready to understand just who Jesus was, what he meant to God's world, and what following him would mean to their own lives.

And so, Jesus made his disciples get into the boat. Jesus made his disciples

depend on one another for their very lives, and to depend on one another's faith for their very lives, as Jesus, the Son of God, prepared them to move way past their comfort zone of physical endurance, of cultural safety, of family ties and local reputation, to head out across a wild and stormy lake to a foreign place, where Jesus would call on them to grow yet again in faith.

The stormy lake that the disciples faced that night was everything that their faith had kept them away from. The word "boat" is never mentioned in the Old Testament - ships on oceans, yes, but never a boat, an open sliver of wood and tar and ropes that fishermen clung to for their very lives. Jesus made the disciples get into the boat, because the God of Israel was more than just the God of the disciples' familiar people, on solid ground that they could claim as their own. This faith that Jesus called them to could only be found in deep water, with no hope in sight from familiar and comfortable things, no salvation except through faith in the one who had sent them to find that faith, the only faith that could save them, now and forever.

And so the disciples of Jesus did get into the boat. The disciples got into the boat; they set their sails; they fought against the wind, they strived together to find the goal to which Jesus was sending them, the goal of salvation and healing for everyone, everywhere, forever. The disciples got into the boat, and worked it out together, relying on one another's strengths, one another's gifts, one another's faith, one another's humanity, and one another's devotion to this man Jesus who seemed to be more than just a man.

None of the disciples did anything extraordinary in that boat individually. It was what they did together that was extraordinary. They encouraged one another. They gave one another hope. They prayed together, I am sure! And in the early hours of the morning, when all of their human strength was exhausted, all of their defenses against God's strength had given out, the disciples saw something in the distance. It was Jesus. Jesus was coming to them. Jesus was ready to make all things right. Jesus was walking on the very waves that made them fear for their very lives, Jesus, the teacher, the healer, the wise one, the loving one, was more than all of this - and Peter was the first one to believe in what that was, not just in his mind, not even just in his heart, but in his very flesh. The waves of death itself could no longer separate Peter from this

faith that Jesus was also the master of all of Creation. and all that was beyond Creation. And so Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water, no longer afraid of death. At least for a moment.

And then Peter, realizing who he was, and where he was, began to sink, and to cry out for help. Peter had deep faith, faith that we has willing to offer to the waves of death itself, but he was still just one person. He needed Jesus. He needed the disciples. He needed to get back into the boat, the boat that Jesus had made them get into. And so, Jesus helped Peter back into the boat. It was then, and only then, that the storm ended. Peter's solitary faith had failed, as any person's would, in the depths of everything that he feared. But together, with the disciples, that little faith would grow, and grow, until it became the church, the family of God, the living presence of Christ all around the world.

We may all wonder at times, what will become of this church? What will become of God's church? What will become of me, and my children, and my grandchildren, and the world's children, when there is no more church to bring Jesus to the world? By faith, we know the answer to the end of this story: God wins. God will always win. God will always triumph over sin and death. God's love will always prevail against the hate and fear that threatens to consume the world again, and again. We know how the story ends. The only question is, what part will we play in that story?

Will we, like the disciples of Jesus, looking at a stormy, dark horizon at the end of a long day, trust that God has prepared for us a journey of grace, a journey in which we will find not only our true selves, but the one and only thing that really matters in the end - true faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, the one who rules over all heaven and earth, now and forever, in God's Holy Spirit?.

Will we, like the disciples, realize that whatever keeps us on familiar shores, safe in our own assumptions about ourselves and our world, cannot possibly give us the discipline of faith that can produce the community and the leaders of the church that we need today, and tomorrow, and for generations to come?

Will we, like the disciples, find the discipline in our love for God in Jesus Christ, to get into the boat - and to trust that our journey with God in discipleship is

the only destination that we really need to find joy, safety, contentment, and peace?

The only way to find true faith, deep faith, abiding faith, faith that can conquer death itself, faith that can help us to rise above the waves of everything that we fear, is to get into the boat of Christian discipleship, along with others who have no idea where the journey will end - but who are glad to have you on the journey with them, as we seek life changing, life-sustaining faith in Jesus Christ together.

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat. I hope and pray, for the sake of our salvation, that you get into the boat, and go with us into deeper waters, and deeper journeys into faith. It is the destination that God is calling you to. Get ready to set sail. Amen.