August 10, 2014
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

About three years ago, on June 25, 2011, I watched the British illusionist Steve Frayne while he stunned the world of magic, and several hundred onlookers on the Westminster Bridge. He “walked across” the Thames River in front of the House of Parliament. It was a marvelous feat, a piece of real showmanship. It launched his career as a performing magician. Of course, true to the magician pact of silence, he will not tell his secret to the illusion. But I’ve wanted to do it… to walk on water, similar to ancient man’s desire to fly, it would certainly open up travel opportunities previously unexplored.

We know that walking on water is nearly impossible. There are tales about the performance of this rare feat in Greek mythology, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Native Americans. In each of these stories, walking on water is the work of those especially touched by the Divine, or gods themselves. Clearly, walking on water was not the domain of mere mortals. And so when we
describe someone “walking on water”, we are describing someone
whose accomplishments are so astounding, so rare, they seem to live in a
different sphere than the rest of us.

In our Gospel today, we are told of an occasion when Jesus walked
on the Sea of Galilee. (All of the Gospels tell some version of a story
where Jesus walks on this body of water.) The Sea of Galilee was a
body of water only 13 miles long, and 8 miles wide, but it was the
*largest fresh water* lake in all of Israel. This was the home fishing hole
for the disciples, especially the experienced fishermen, Peter and
Andrew, James and John. They knew this lake the way we know our
own backyard, and especially at night, since it was at night when the
fishermen on the Sea of Galilee cast their nets. After a long and
exhilarating day when Jesus fed the multitude, Jesus sent the disciples
ahead, rowing across the lake, while he sought some peace and quiet.

You might recall that he had just learned about the murder of John
the Baptist, a kinsman of Mary’s family, the one who foretold his
ministry, and from whom he received baptism. Soon, John would lose his head from a tyrant King at the behest of a dancing girl. It was a stark reminder that prophets do not usually live a long life, nor die a tranquil death. Surely John’s death at the hands of a political ruler foretold Jesus’ own death. Jesus needed to grieve John’s death, and perhaps also to grieve his own. But while Jesus wanted to retreat to pray and grieve, the crowd followed him like paparazzi. So, Jesus suspended his private time and personal needs to feed them, as we heard last week. But now, (postponed by his compassion for the crowd)… his need for silence and solitude was even greater. He sends his disciples ahead on what should have been a routine night crossing of the narrow body of water.

But nothing is routine when a storm comes suddenly upon the lake. Now the simple crossing becomes crushingly difficult. The wind and the waves are against them, the lightning flashes menacingly, and their muscles strain at the oars while making little or no headway against the angry weather. Isn’t it interesting how a change in atmosphere can turn the familiar into a foreign terrain? Have you ever wandered around
blindly in your own garage or house during a power blackout, and found that it had become a strange land without a map? Have you ever been caught on the golf course during a sudden thunderstorm, and suddenly the pleasant afternoon under sunny skies becomes a life-threatening dash for cover from lightning bolts crashing around you like bombs?

That was what the disciples were feeling when the waves were against them, turning the routine crossing into an all-night row for their lives. When you get tired, when the night is darkest, you also get tired emotionally, and perhaps become a little superstitious, or a little paranoid. So at the fourth watch of the night, between 3:00 and 6:00 am, Jesus finally came to the struggling weary disciples, walking out on the water as if taking a casual stroll in a grassy park on a sunny day. They were terrified, and thought he was a ghost. Such are the superstitions of ancient mariners, especially during life-threatening storms. But despite the assurances of Jesus to calm their fears, Peter asked Jesus to prove that it was him… by bidding Peter to join Jesus on the water’s angry surface. When you think about it, that was an incredible request. Wouldn’t it have been a more reasonable request to ask Jesus to just
We know the story. At first, Peter was able to walk on the water too. But then he took his eyes off Jesus, and focused on the danger of the waves, and the total foolishness of walking on water in the first place, and he began to sink. We might wish the story had not ended that way, with Peter doubting and sinking, and having to be hauled back aboard the ship dripping wet and heavy with his failed attempt. Wouldn’t it have been a better story if Peter had made it all the way to Jesus, and the other disciples had all followed suit, until they were all prancing and rejoicing out on the water with their Lord? Perhaps so. But that is not the story Matthew tells us. And frankly, we would have difficulty relating to such a story anyway. But Peter trying and failing, part faith and part doubt—that is a story to which we can all relate. For that is our story, each and every one of us. Who among us has not started a great endeavor—to run a marathon, to pursue a challenging career, to have a lasting and loving marriage, to write a novel or symphony, to speak in front of a crowd—only to find that the waves are
often against us, that the risks of failure are all around us? Suddenly our resolve and confidence begin to wane, our strength and perseverance begins to weaken, and we abandon the course before it is finished, slinking back into the safety of the boat in a sopping pool of misery and defeat. This is Peter’s story, and it is our story too. And maybe that is why we love Peter so much. And maybe that is why he is the first head of the Church, the Rock upon which the Church would be built.

**Because our Lord excels where we do not.** He is faithful, even when we are not. He walks on water, even when we sink. It is his voice that bids us swing our legs over the side of safety and take a risk, and his hand that holds us when we fail magnificently while daring great things.