

Pentecost 8- Year A- Matthew 14:22-33
(August 6-7, 2011)- Intern Travis Wilson

One of the things that I think many of you probably do not know about me by now is that I am a big fan of poetry. I used to write poetry when I was younger, and at least I thought it was pretty good stuff. It was no Keats or Shakespeare, but it was a chance for me to get my thoughts and feelings out on paper. My favorite poem is one by Robert Frost that I'll bet a lot of you know. Part of it goes like this:

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, And sorry I could not travel both, And be one traveler, long I stood, And looked down one as far as I could, To where it bent in the undergrowth; Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by.”

This is such a simple poem, but what it asks us to do is not always so easy. It asks us to choose which road to go down, the one well trodden or the one less traveled. I'm very often lured to go down the one well trodden because at least I know that people have traveled the road before me, at least I know that it is a secure road. Taking the road less traveled might mean that the journey will be more difficult, or certainly it is a road filled with unknown obstacles, twists, and turns. Sometimes we are called to take the road less traveled, and I believe today is one of those days.

Today, I am taking a different road when it comes to Peter in our gospel lesson from Matthew. I am taking the road less traveled, the unpopular road, and probably, for me, the uneasy road. You see, today I could join with other preachers who are quick to point out all of Peter's faults in our gospel lesson, to reveal all of the mistakes that he makes out on the water.

Most of us are familiar with this story. Jesus sends the disciples off in a boat to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while he goes up the mountain for some much needed prayer time. The boat the disciples are in becomes battered by the waves and thrashes about wildly by the wind. At daybreak, Jesus comes toward them on the sea and they are afraid

and think he's a ghost. He tells them, "Take heart, here I am; do not be afraid." Peter asks if this person is really Jesus, then Jesus should command him to come on the water to him. Jesus says, okay, come on. Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water; he looks around, becomes frightened, and starts to sink. He cries out for Jesus to save him and Jesus immediately reaches down to pull him up and says to him, "you of little faith, why did you doubt?" They climb in the boat, the wind ceases and all the disciples praise Jesus confessing that he is truly the Son of God.

The road well traveled among preachers today as I said would be to point out all of Peter's faults and everything that he just did wrong in that story. You might hear from one of these preachers that Peter's problem is that he does not keep his eyes focused on Jesus. Sure there are crashing waves and rough waters, but Peter is a fisherman, shouldn't he be used to that by now? Yes, the sea in the ancient world represents chaos, confusion, and havoc, but everyone knows the worse your troubles are, the more chaotic your world is, then it is precisely the time you need to focus on Jesus. Duh, Peter. Stop your doubting and trust in the one who is the master of wind and wave.

Oh it's so easy to do this and to go down this road today. Peter should have stayed in the boat; didn't he know what he was doing? How could he not recognize Jesus? Every word that Jesus said was something Jesus had said before, how could he *really* not get it?

I have chosen, today, to take the road less traveled. Instead of pointing out Peter's poor choices in the matter, instead of making him the scapegoat for every time that our gaze wanders from Jesus; I have come to the conclusion that this story isn't about Peter, and it isn't fundamentally about us. The road less traveled for me as a preacher today is not to emphasize failure, but rather to keep our eyes focused on Jesus. I know that sounds contradictory, but hear me out. This is fundamentally a story about how Jesus acts and what happens when we take our gaze off of Jesus-- we begin to sink. "Jesus immediately reaches out his hand" to catch us.

Sure, I will grant you that Peter should have kept his eyes focused on Jesus; it was somewhat silly to do otherwise. However, we have to be honest with ourselves too. We should also keep our eyes focused on Jesus, but the reality is sometimes we don't! We can't keep our eyes focused on Jesus, because we are sinful people. We want to get out of the boat and we want to show all of our friends back in the boat that we can do it on our own. We can do it, we can walk on water too; we're invincible, nothing can harm us—that is, until we realize we are in the middle of the water, in the middle of the chaos, in the middle of messed up lives and an unjust world.

We know all too well what it is like to be sinking in the waters, to be hit over the head with waves of chaos and suffering. Some of you can tell us about being caught up in waves of violence from the relationships in your life. Some can tell us what it is to have your world turned upside down by the death of a loved one or spouse. Others can tell of treading water between the choking waves of depression, anxiety, or some other mental illness. People in this room can share stories of overcoming addictions to alcohol, drugs, sex, food, and other sorts of things. Some of us are battling cancer, diabetes, dyslexia, ADD and ADHD, bi-polar disorder, and any other number of diseases or disorders. We, as people in the United States, are affected by raging storms of debt reduction, violence prevention, providing sound learning and educational environments for both children and adults, and so many more things. These are the realities of the waters that surround us and even pull us down trying to make us sink.

And like Peter, we cry out, Lord save us. The disciples in the boat resonated with Peter because Peter comes to represent all of them. We resonate with Peter, because Peter is a mirror for us. This story is our story, we can see ourselves on the water, even sinking down into the deep and we are crying out for salvation, for freedom from the waters swirling over us. When Peter gets out of the boat to go toward Jesus, he's not thinking about sinking or swimming, he's thinking about being with Jesus. Jesus is gliding over the waters, smoothly walking over all that is in chaos and uproar. The view on top of the water with Jesus is

very different from the view under the water struggling and gasping for breath. But when we lose our gaze, when we give in to the chaos and start to sink and cry out for help, the view we have is simply of Jesus leaning down and pulling us up, drying us off, and getting us back in the boat.

This is a story about Jesus and about how Jesus acts. Jesus is the one that stills the storms and calms the waters. He is the one who immediately wraps his hand around ours to pull us up out of the water. This is an intimate act, and Jesus wants to be intimate with us. He wants to show us that he is right there in the middle of our chaotic lives; we just have to focus our gaze on him. He wants us to know how much he loves us and he is willing to do anything to reach in and save us. Pastor David Lohse of Luther Seminary says, “Jesus wants more than to command our attention; he wants to save our lives.” Jesus walks right over the chaos and suffering in our lives to reach down and save us from it. So turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full into his wonderful face and then reach out your hand to grab his, because as Peter will tell you, it’s the best feeling ever—feeling totally embraced in love by the Son of God.

It is no secret that this is my last weekend with you. There are no words to describe my internship experience among you this year. Actually, maybe there are words, as Ed reminded me this week, there are too many words to say. Thank you for being a congregation that is focused on discipleship and following Jesus. Thank you for welcoming all people regardless of race, age, gender, sexual orientation, ability or disability. Thank you for embracing Kristen and I with the love and peace that Christ has shown you. I am grateful for the ways in which you have allowed and encouraged me to grow as a leader in the Church. You have trusted me with your life stories and allowed me to walk with you through good times and bad. You have been compassionate through my struggles with my vision and with driving, and I appreciate all of you who have volunteered and who have driven me around town. First Lutheran is a vibrant congregation that shows hospitality and love to all people in a turbulent world. It has been an honor to serve with you as

your intern pastor, to work with such a fine, gifted staff, and to learn and serve with an incredible supervisor and mentor.

I will miss all of you so very much. You are a blessing not only to me, but also to the whole Church as you send interns out to proclaim the gospel and God's love for all. As we depart one from another this day, I pray that you would follow me down the road less traveled. Keep your eyes focused on Jesus as he sends you down this road into the chaotic, topsy turvy, and sometimes unfamiliar world. Open yourself to his life changing love, and don't be afraid to share that love with others. And, when the waters become too great and you start to sink, keep focused on Jesus; I promise it will make all the difference, for you will be saved.

Amen.