

August 10, 2008
Into the ocean
Matthew 14:32

The two of them climbed into the boat, and the wind died down.

So, this teaching in Matthew's gospel has given me pause to review my adult life experience. In a sense, I wouldn't be in Ohio today, let alone speaking in a house of faith, if I hadn't stepped into and out of the boat more than a few times. Here's what I'm talking about. Making our way through life we're faced with opportunities and decisions. If we're fortunate, some of the earlier decisions are easier and some of the early opportunities safe. We make decisions, we climb into the boat; we accept opportunities, we step into the ocean. That's my metaphor for understanding this morning's lesson.

So we're faced with opportunities and decisions: where to go to school, what to study, perhaps; whether or not to accept a job opportunity; yes or no to this or that proposal; where to raise a family, whether or not to buy that house... and should I join this church?

Joining a church is a decision every bit as important as any of the others. In all of the world the church is the "boat", if you will, out of which people are routinely invited to step into an ocean of opportunity to serve. This particular church is an excellent example of this kind of faith in action.

Hudson First Congregational Church steps out of the boat into the world of service in many ways. Consider the list of mission activities on your web site: the Mission Board of the church works through community organizations such as Hudson Community Service, OPEN-M (Akron), Western Reserve Outreach Center (Twinsburg), and Community AIDS network (Akron). It is involved in education through Adopt-A-Family, Abstinence Is a Better Choice, our theological seminaries of The United Church of Christ, Hudson CARE, and Yale Divinity School.

Food/hunger outreach support is offered to the Akron Canton Food Bank, Gennesaret (a soup kitchen), Mobile Meals, Haven of Rest, Salvation Army and Williard UCC Church.

Health and Emergency services are accessed through Access Inc., the Battered Women's Shelter, Community Support Services, International Institute, and Job Search.

Housing Assistance is available through Appalachian Service Project, Chapel Hill Homes, and Habitat for Humanity, and Hope Homes.

Partners in Service (PinS) is the coordinating team for hands-on ministries in which families can be involved. Interfaith Hospitality Network which houses homeless families in Summit County is their current project.

Has anyone here been involved with any of these mission activities? Raise your hands for me now, will you? I want to tell you, it's gratifying and encouraging for me to be "in the boat" with you people of faith. I take your show of hands as a measure of support for the work we do in the Summit Lake neighborhood of Akron.

Now some of you know the Summit Lake neighborhood for what it was, and some of you know it for what it has become. Some of you don't know it at all, and I'm fixin' to remedy that today.

The Summit Lake area can still be called a neighborhood. You might recognize it as such if you drove through. You might also roll up your windows as you did. It's not too active there in the morning, but it's much more so in the afternoon and it can get pretty rowdy in the evening.

There's been quite a turnover in neighbors over the past three years. This is no surprise in a place where maybe 20% of the houses are owner occupied. Of course, neighbors don't get to know one another in quite the same way as when they purchase homes and stay put awhile. But this is one opportunity that eludes many of those I meet on the south side of Akron.

Here now, let's make it real. Consider the impact of this kind of uprootedness on young children. We've seen it at Miller Avenue Church in our annual vacation Bible school, where this year over half of the 35 children registered were new to the neighborhood. I wish I could tell you where the other half is staying today. Rowdy streets in the evening; high rate of residential turnover; children moving out of the school district every 12-18 months. This is a community beyond transition, my friends. This is a turbulent, churning gathering of humanity. Imagine stepping from a place of relative comfort - say, Canal Fulton where I stay, or Hudson where you folks live - into the chaos of Summit Lake. If you've got that feeling now, then you can no doubt appreciate the experience Peter had as he left the relative safety of the boat and stepped into the Sea of Galilee. Reflect on his life story for a moment: he had left his work as a fisherman; he studied under this rabbi; he practiced his discipleship; he offered his testimony...

... and he stepped into the ocean.

Here is Peter, already in the boat. He's a member of the in-group, Jesus' chosen disciples, and he's come quite some way from where he was when he decided to

follow this rabbi. Even though at this moment we find him and his brothers in a boat on a turbulent sea, they have been here before, too (Matthew 8:23-27). But this time, Jesus comes to them across the water. He comes to them and this frightens them. That Jesus, he's always doing something new! He comes to them and Peter, calling up his meager courage, seems to challenge this apparition walking on the sea: " Master, if it's really you, call me to come to you on the water." (vs 28)

And Jesus does. He does call him... "Come ahead." Out of the boat and into the ocean. That's the challenge, over and over again, that Jesus extends to his disciples. Out of the boat and into the ocean. Out of the church and into the world. Get it?

At First Congregational Church we have cause to celebrate that we have found a boat in which we find relative security. But let me emphasize that this is a special, distinctive boat in which you have gathered. It's not just a secure community; it's a faith community. Even more - it's a Christian faith community. So you know what you can expect?

Jesus will come to you, over and over again, and invite you to step into the ocean. You will be challenged, over and over again, to make decisions and consider opportunities. It may even get more difficult, more challenging over time. That's the nature of discipleship, my sisters and brothers in faith. I've got an invitation for you - an opportunity, if you will. Sunday the 31st of August is a 5th Sunday, and your church has already taken on the responsibility of serving a meal at the 5th Sunday celebration at Miller Avenue Church that afternoon. You all did this last year, and I've got a short video of that event to share with you in fellowship hall today.

So you see you're in a boat with folks who dare to step into the ocean once in awhile. Like Peter, you can climb back into the boat and the wind will die down. But like Peter and all disciples, you'll find that the wind will pick back up again and you'll be invited, by Jesus, to step into the churning, chaotic ocean. It's a faith walk, friends. We do it with Jesus. That's the boat we're in. Ain't it grand!