

What Encourages Your Living?

Long-time and newer friends, the Love of God gathers us together for a time of reflection. We find ourselves in space – this park land that has been in loving relationship with people and other species for millennia before us; and in this time – this eleventh of twenty-five Sundays in our long green, growing season of Ordinary Time. Let's wonder together today: what encourages each of us in our living? Let us pray:

O God of each unique life journey, as stories of your prophet Elijah and of Peter and Jesus invite us to stretch our spirits and minds; grant us serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Throughout the past week, I have felt troubled by Jesus' behavior toward Peter in today's gospel reading from Matthew. The opportunity to share reflections with you this morning gave me impetus to explore my discomfort. As a child growing up in a particularly conservative Christian church and school, I was taught that Jesus was the hero in every situation – a God-Man whose behavior was consistently flawless and without contradiction. As far as I was concerned as a child, Jesus was pretty boring and deeply unrelatable.

The typical childhood recap of today's story went something like this: The disciples got caught in a storm out on the sea. In the midst of the commotion, they saw Jesus walking across the water and figured he was a ghost. Peter heard Jesus calling to them, had a back and forth with Jesus, then got out of the boat to walk toward his teacher and friend. But when Peter got too scared, he began to sink. So Jesus reached out and saved Peter. Then Jesus got into the boat with them and the storm calmed down.

Did Jesus act as a heroic savior in the story? I suppose so. Possibly of more importance, did Jesus act as a compassionate teacher and friend. I would argue that he definitely did not.

I invite you to close your eyes now (if you're comfortable doing so) for a few moments of visualization. I am then going to ask you a question and invite you us practice vulnerability by speaking out loud your responses if we feel so moved. So with eyes closed now:

Have you ever felt overwhelmed, scared, and perhaps panicky when you found yourself caught in a threatening situation? Maybe it was a set of circumstances in which you felt stuck or as though you were sinking. How would have felt if you touched based with a mentor or close respected friend, shared how you were feeling and your need for help, and that person responded: "You have so little faith! Why do you doubt?" What feelings would that provoke in you? (*pause*) As you open your eyes, please speak out your feeling word if you feel open to saying it out loud.

[sad, inadequate, shame, threatened, hurt]

Thank you for sharing quietly and out loud.

In several other common biblical translations (the King James, the New International, and the New Revised Standard), Jesus words to Peter are remembered in this way: "*You of little faith,*" he said. "Why did you doubt?" I am not trying to suggest that Jesus did not care about Peter and his wellbeing. I am arguing that Jesus drew on some of his meaner instincts to deliver his concern as a jab.

Let's talk about "tough love" for a minute (as we may find ourselves wanting to pass off Jesus' put-down as tough love).

According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, tough love is this: "*love or affectionate concern expressed in a stern or unsentimental manner (as through discipline) especially to promote responsible behavior.*"

And Google's dictionary through Oxford Languages offers this definition of tough love: *"promotion of a person's welfare... by enforcing certain constraints on them or requiring them to take responsibility for their actions."*

Ok, so tough love specifically addresses behavior (and, even more specifically, accountability to behavioral norms) through disciplinary action that is often felt to be strict or constraining. If we think back through our lives, some humans thrive in environments in which parents, teachers, coaches and bosses manage and guide behavior through tough love. And many humans do not thrive in such environments.

I feel strongly that no one in that boat should have let Jesus' words to Peter pass as tough love. *"You have so little faith"* or *"You of little faith"* – those are putdowns. Jesus was attacking Peter's character – stating an assumption that Peter's spiritual capacity was deficient. Based on what? Apparently, Jesus' judgement was based on Peter appearing frightened, faltering in his physical movement and crying out for help.

If anyone displayed spiritual deficiency in that moment, it was definitely Jesus. I think a key take-away from this story can be Jesus' model of how NOT to respond when a friend is in crisis. Character attacks are rarely helpful and are particularly unhelpful in the midst of crisis. Jesus demonstrated care by reaching out from his position of relative ease to catch Peter's hand and assist him back to the boat. However, he could have demonstrated empathy by biting his tongue as judgement reared its ugly head and offered reassuring eye contact as he helped Peter up. If there were no opportunity for eye contact amidst the chaos, Jesus could have waited to ask Peter a caring question once they were drying off aboard the boat. He could have asked something like this: "I noticed what looked like fear in your face out there. Was I seeing right? I'm wondering, what were you most afraid of?"

So often, when we are struggling, what we most need is to know that people see our struggle and care about our wellbeing.

I hope that one of the others on the boat, out of concern that Peter would not lose touch with his belovedness, confronted Jesus about his harsh behavior. And I hope that Jesus would have stayed in the refining fire of caring confrontation, open to humbly taking responsibility for his actions. We know from other stories in the gospels that Jesus demonstrated being nimble enough to be taught lessons by others – particularly people even further to the margins of society than were he and his buddies. What might Peter have needed to encourage his living that day out on the choppy sea? I sense that Jesus did not avoid Peter's fear by looking away or ignoring it. That was one way he did demonstrate compassion.

Let's turn to the piece of the prophet Elijah's journey that we heard this morning from the book of First Kings. This week, what stood out to me most prominently from this story was Elijah's expressed state of desperate exhaustion and the way in which the Love of God responded. The text describes Elijah as full of fear as he fled for his life. I wonder how Elijah's attendant felt when Elijah left the attendant behind as he continued to journey alone in the desert?

When Elijah arrives to his first resting place, he articulates to God, *"I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors."* We will look at Love's response in a moment. But let's pause to speak about mental health in light of Elijah's suicidal ideation.

Here are some statistics from NAMI – National Alliance on Mental Illness:

"1 in 5 U.S. adults experience mental illness each year." That means that likely 4 or 5 of us gathered in person this morning and some of those gathered with us online are currently managing mental health challenges.

"1 in 20 U.S. adults experience serious mental illness each year."

“1 in 6 U.S. youth aged 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year.” 26 of our 40 children and youth in our merging congregation fit into that age span of 6-17 – 26 of our young ones. That means that 3 of them are currently experiencing mental health challenges.

“50% of all lifetime mental illness begins by age 14, and 75% [of lifetime mental illness begins] by age 24.”

And finally, *“Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death among people aged 10-14.”* And we know that rates of mental illness and suicidal ideation are much higher for LGBTQ+ youth than for the rest of their peers.

What do we do with these alarming and concretely real statistics?

At the national setting of the United Church of Christ, a Mental Health Network began in 1992.

At the 2015 General Synod (the triennial gathering of UCC folk from across the nation), a resolution was passed to develop network of UCC churches that would be WISE (welcoming, inclusive, supportive and engaged) around mental health. That was in 2015.

And In 2019, St. Peter’s UCC in Stillwater engaged in a discernment process and developed a covenant as a WISE for mental health congregation.

We all look forward to exploring the WISE process as a merged congregation in the coming year. We are already laying groundwork to engage with the UCC’s Open and Affirming process related to LGBTQ+ inclusivity this fall of 2023.

Back to our story, how did Love respond to Elijah in his moment of desperate exhaustion and suicidal ideation? Love came near and touched Elijah. Love didn’t give up after a first attempt. Love returned and would have returned again and again with fierce persistence if Elijah had needed continued reminders of God’s steady loving presence.

Twice the voice of Love asked Elijah, “What are you doing here?” Love stays curious, seeing and affirming the other.

Love’s encouraging power gets embodied by us when we pay attention to one another – attentive enough to act with empathy and compassion.

Like Peter, may we reach out for support when we need it.

Like Jesus, may we not turn away from another’s pain.

Like Elijah, may we keep seeking the face and voice of God – everywhere it shows up.

May we encourage one another as we journey together, because Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
A Merging Congregation @ People’s Park (Bayport, MN)
August 13, 2023 (11th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
1 Kings 19: 1-13, Matt. 14: 22-33