



**A Sinking Rock**  
**Matthew 14:22-33**  
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Over the past month, we've been considering how Christ calls us to *Be the Change* in the world today. Without question, change is needed. It doesn't take a State of the Union and a following response to the State of the Union to see that as a nation, we're pretty divided in our perspectives and thoughts on how to be "great." While the division in our national politics tends to be most visible as it tends to take center stage on the major news networks and on the front page of the daily paper, our division as a nation goes much deeper than just politics. Division of thought and belief plague our relationships, our businesses, even our church.

To be clear, having varied opinions is not unhealthy in and of itself. Some of the greatest inventions and societal changes throughout the history of humanity have come because of a difference of opinion. (America itself was birthed out of a difference of opinion!) Our problems do not stem from people having different opinions. Our problems stem from our inability to maintain civility and humility when dealing with those whose opinions differ. Instead of accepting our differences and acknowledging the potential good in those who think, look, and act differently, we demonize the other and claim that no good can come from any one whose ideas and beliefs differ from our own. Everybody thinks they – and only they – have the right answers. *That* is the problem.

Yet, Jesus offers a better way. In the beatitudes, found in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches a path to discipleship that welcomes our differences, and invites us to claim God's vision of a created humanity that shares in the glory of the Almighty. The beatitudes are not necessarily intended to be taken as individual traits of discipleship, but offer a systematic approach to faithfulness.

We began a few weeks back with Matthew 5:3, claiming first that we are blessed when we have an impoverished spirit. That is, a spirit that acknowledges that we are broken – that we are not sufficient in and of ourselves. Next, Matthew 5:4 says we are blessed if we mourn. Mourning is the expected response of those who acknowledge personal and societal brokenness. True mourning leaves no room for pride; instead, it creates humility. And this is the next step from Matthew 5:5, which says blessed are the meek. Meekness is not a sign of resignation; it's quite the opposite. Meekness, as used by Jesus in the beatitudes, is a *resiliency* of humility. Meekness is the determination to persistently acknowledge our inadequacy, our limited knowledge, and our self-motivated desire, all while naming sufficient God's abundance, eternal knowledge, and self-giving motivation.

Following meekness, the next step of discipleship, as Christ names it in Matthew 5:6, says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

It would do us well to name this up front and to not mistake Christ's words. Christ does *not* say, "Blessed are those who are *right* ..." The whole process of discipleship, as laid out in the beatitudes, is admitting that we – humanity, individually and corporately – are broken, are wrong, and are in need of a savior. So what then does Christ mean by saying, "Blessed are those who seek righteousness?" What is righteousness?

We would not be the first to ask such a question. Indeed, most of the encounters Jesus had with leaders among the Jewish community – scribes, Pharisees, and others – were built upon the hope of better understanding God's will regarding righteousness. Knowledge of how to define righteousness is why such leaders challenged Jesus on his understanding of keeping the Sabbath and on interpreting Torah, among others.

Scan down the Biblical text just a bit, and you'll see beginning in Matthew 5:21, Jesus seeks to better define righteousness. He says, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.'" <sup>22</sup>But I say to you that if you are *angry* with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement." Again, just a few verses further, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'" <sup>28</sup>But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with *lust* has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

In his definition, Jesus is seeking to correct a faulty understanding wherein we claim that what is wrong is just sinful *action*. "Jesus is telling us he doesn't [just] want us to avoid the inevitable end of hate, for when hate runs its course unabated the unavoidable last stop on the train is the destruction of the one we hate. Jesus doesn't just want us to avoid the end of hate: murder. He wants us to avoid the beginning of hate: anger."<sup>i</sup> Such a shift in understanding righteousness has one goal in mind, an unabated focus on the goodness of God in all people, in all places, and at all times.

When our focus is on our personal desires, or accomplishing our personal will, or getting our own way, or our superiority over others, it can mean only one thing, that our focus isn't on God's will, or God's way, or God's authority. To hunger and thirst for righteousness is just this – it's continually seeking God's will, God's way, and God's authority.

Consider our story in Matthew 14. If you back up just a bit in the text, you find that our story on the sea takes place just after the feeding of the 5,000 men, and the additional women and children who were present. Jesus has just turned what amounts to almost no food into enough food that the masses have eaten – and they've eaten well. Immediately after the food has been consumed, Jesus tells the disciples to get into a boat and head to the other side of the sea. Jesus then dismisses the rest of the crowds, and goes up the mountain to pray by himself. By the time evening has set in, Jesus is alone, the disciples have gone out in the boat, and the masses have departed.

Evidently, while he was praying, a storm front moved in. When evening sets in, the boat was far from shore and was battered by the waves, and the disciples were navigating against a heavy

wind. It's dark out – it's night time. Jesus meanders down the mountain and begins walking out on the water toward the boat. The narrative isn't clear just how long they've been out there, but it seems that they've been out there a while. One can only imagine that, if they've been dealing with the waves throughout the evening, they're probably pretty exhausted. Perhaps that's why they thought Jesus to be a ghost as he approached the boat. In their exhaustion, they thought him to be a spirit hovering over the waters. Perhaps their wearied eyes deceived them. They cried out in fear – fear of certain ruin.

But what they see is Jesus, who cries out to them, "Take heart; it is I; do not be afraid." For these Jewish men, steeped in the words of Torah, the words "it is I" bring up the memory of the burning bush, from which God spoke to Moses, "I am." There's power in those words – the power of assurance, the power of faith, the power of comfort.

Peter, the one whom Christ would call the rock of the church, seems to recognize the phrase and beckons out, "If it is you, Lord, command for me to come to you on the water."

Have you ever played this scene out mentally? Go ahead – close your eyes for a moment. Picture the scene.

There's the boat a little more than half way across the Sea of Galilee. The waves, raging in the sea, are crashing up the side of the boat, dumping water on the disciples. The wind is ripping through the sails, which are beginning to tear from the masts. It's nearly pitch black out – the skies are darkened with clouds. On the boat are the disciples; there's 12 of them, most of which made their livelihood on these waters as fishers. Picture them. This is not a foreign place for them, yet they are not usually there at this time of night, and even with their knowledge of how to sail a boat, they are terrified at just how bad the storm is proving to be.

Can you picture this? Ok, now open your eyes. With that visual in mind, what's the safest place for the disciples to be? With the chaos of the sea, what's the safest place for Peter to be? ... Now, I love fishing, but I don't find myself out on a boat that often. So, perhaps my limited knowledge of boating jades my thinking, but I don't think that getting out of the boat is the safest move. Right? It seems that, as unsafe as it is to be on the boat, that's still a safer place than climbing out of the boat and into the raging waters.

It's also hard to imagine the other 11 disciples were ok with Peter's request to get out of the boat. As if managing the boat in the storm wasn't difficult enough already, one of the 12 is about to abandon ship. Peter invites Jesus' command to get out and to go to Jesus on the water.

Jesus obliges, simply saying, "Come."

Perhaps we should praise Peter. He seems to be following Jesus' beatitudes pretty well so far. He's poor in spirit, acknowledging that he can't save himself. He's mourning the brokenness of the situation and crying out in terrible fear. He's meek – he's willing to admit that Christ's way – walking on the water – looks a lot better than his way – struggling aboard the boat with the rest

of the poor and fledgling disciples. And he's thirsting for righteousness. He's seeking to do things Christ's way.

As he gets out, lo and behold, he's walking on the water. Quite unexpectedly, this plan is working. He's actually doing it! What's he's doing goes against all common sense, but in devoting himself to Christ's way of doing things, it's actually working.

We tend to skip past this moment too quickly to get to his failure, because, well, we all love a good story of failure. Like video clips of people crashing like fools that come up online. Am I the only one? A video comes up online with people looking like idiots, home videos of ridiculous mistakes, from ski crashes to diving board flops to feats of masculine stupidity ... I'm there for it. ... But let's just rest in this moment of Peter's success. This is what discipleship is supposed to look like. He's named his brokenness and mourned over it, he's admitted that his way isn't working, but that God's way is good, and he's pursuing Christ. The rock is proving to be the foundation of the church.

Until he begins to sink.

The text says that Peter began to notice the wind, and he became frightened. One is right to question, why would you even care about the wind when you're literally walking on water? Like, if you're going to fail in this moment, if you're going to fail as a disciple in this situation, shouldn't the failure be pride? Shouldn't Peter have just been over-amazed at himself? I mean, if he had turned back to the boat and boasted at how awesome he was, I'd totally understand his sinking. But no, he's worried about the wind.

In what was a moment of great discipleship, Peter lost sight of that which was empowering him. When Peter is focused on doing things God's way, when he's following in the path of Christ, when he's going against everything that seems right by our limited human understanding to seek the way of God, lo and behold, he is able to do the unfathomable. But when his attention shifts to the narrowness of the human mind, when his focus shifts from God's abundance to his own limited ability, he begins to sink.

And perhaps this should come as no surprise. When we lift up our inadequate understanding, when we restrict others to pursue only the ideas and beliefs that we have – as an individual or a corporate entity, we are likely to find ourselves like Peter sinking in the raging seas. When you look closely, it seems that this self-aggrandizement that claims we are sufficient in and of ourselves, that we are better than those around us, that we have the monopoly on being right, and that our people – defined by whatever demographic factor you want to claim – are better, more worthwhile, and more capable than the other ... it seems this narcissism is the root of every divisive facet in our society, whether political, racial, religious, or otherwise.

See, Christ offers, that if we want to pursue the will of God, if we want to realize God's glory among all of humanity, then we have to hunger and thirst for righteousness, which is only possible when we remain focused on God's way. Jesus says that hating the other isn't the only problem; the problem is that we're focusing on the things that cause hate in the first place. By

focusing on our personal glory and satisfaction, we turn to hate, and envy, and lust, and .... and before any action on these has taken place ... before we get to adultery, or murder, or theft ... we've already taken our focus off God's glory in Christ. Christ says seek righteousness; focus on God's goodness, and that will allow you to *Be the Change*.

Yet, for as often as we lose focus ... for as far as we have strayed from God's vision of faithfulness ... when we begin to sink, or when we already under water, there is Christ, extending himself to us, offering us again new life. "Why did you doubt?" the Lord asks. Why did you not believe that God's call to love, to trust, and to offer strength was enough?

When we center ourselves and claim our opinion is what will offer salvation, we will find ourselves sinking in raging seas. But the God of goodness, the God of love, the God of all creation will be there to extend an arm the offers a new beginning. The God of all people, the God of eternal life. promises to lift us up, to set us back on dry land, and continues to be faithful to a covenant that promises redemption for all of creation.

The call of God to faithfulness upon all who seek truth is to seek Christ. Truth lies in the faithfulness of Christ, who gave his own life that we might have life. May such a witness of love be our guide.

Blessed are those who thirst and hunger for righteousness, for they will be filled.

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i Rob Lough. "From Right to Righteous." Ebenezerumc.org. Retrieved February 4, 2019.