

OCEANS

You might not know this, but today is a very special Sunday. This is the fifth anniversary of my first Sunday as the pastor of what we now call the United in Faith Parish. I didn't plan for this, but I am so glad that we are all together for this great day. I actually wouldn't have thought of it, but my friend, Pastor Peggy Hanson, sent me a Snapchat last Sunday celebrating her appointment anniversary and the fact that she'd be serving Trinity UMC in Lead for three years. This got me to counting backwards. Last week was four years, fifty-one weeks, so this week is the start of our fifth year together, even though the "official" start of all appointments is July 1. And I know I hear often, which I appreciate, that you feel lucky I'm here; and I want you to know that it's more than lip-service or fluff when I say that it is an honor to be here and to be so embraced by you. Have there been missteps along the way? You bet. Will there be more as we continue as partners in ministry? You better believe there will be. Over the past five years, we have risked, we have changed. We've heard the call of Jesus to step out of the boat. And together, we've journeyed together. We've walked confidently, we've sunk a bit. And it's my hope that we have clung to Christ as Peter did in our scripture this morning.

Today, we're continuing our Summer Setlist series. We're looking at songs that have been suggested by members and friends of the United in Faith Parish. And today, we look at a praise song that came on the scene in 2012 from Hillsong called "Oceans." The team at Hillsong took their motivation for this song from this story from the gospels, of Jesus calling Peter out onto the water.

Our scripture this morning comes after an amazingly difficult day. As one of the commentaries I read put it: "The message of this passage is clear, but so much happens."

In Matthew 14, in twenty-one short verses, Jesus learns that his cousin and beloved friend John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod. Shaken by the news, Jesus then goes off by himself in a boat to mourn, think, pray... But the crowd follows Jesus on foot, gathers around him, and Jesus is compelled by his earthly mission of reaching all God's lost children. So, Jesus teaches, and he teaches for so long that the crowds need to eat. It is here that Jesus feeds the five thousand men gathered around (not counting women and children). After Jesus feeds this multitude and the leftovers have been collected, Jesus dismisses the disciples and the crowds and finally goes up the mountain to pray, to reconnect with God, to mourn for his cousin and friend.

But the day that seems like it won't end still will not end: Jesus journeys to join his disciples on the other side of the Sea of Galilee and finds his disciples caught in a storm. And he walks down to them in the midst of the swells and storm. Uncertain of what they're seeing, the disciples respond in fear. And I guess I can't blame the disciples for that response. Perhaps they were too tired to remember they were following the Son of God. Perhaps they were too tired to expect a miracle after witnessing the miracle of the feeding. Or even perhaps, they, like us, did not expect to see someone walking across the water to them (because that's not what usually happens).

Nonetheless, the disciples, and namely Peter, need proof. They do not believe it's Jesus; they're convinced it is a ghost and that they should respond in fear. So, Peter, as he is wont to do, dives headlong into the situation: "Lord, if it is you, command me to leave this boat and let me walk upon the waters." And Jesus does exactly this. And Peter responds in faith. He exits the boat; he walks on the water. But once he realizes what he's doing and just exactly how absurd it is, he begins to sink.

And so many times, we hear this as Peter's failure or a lack of faith. But notice where Peter clings: Peter clings to Christ. Peter doesn't rely on his own strength and water acumen and try to swim back to the boat. Peter doesn't give up and succumb to the waves. Peter clings to Jesus. This isn't a lack of faith. Michael Wilkins writes, "Peter has faith; it just isn't functioning properly...faith is not like a commodity of which Peter needs more. Rather, faith is a consistent trust in Jesus to accomplish what Peter is called to do."

It is faith in Jesus that allows to the disciples to cross the tumultuous sea; it is faith in Jesus that allows Peter to take that step out of the boat. It is faith that keeps Peter alive as he finds himself sinking. It is faith that gives us the boldness to sing a song like Oceans. To sing, "Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders, let me walk upon the waters, wherever You would call me."

But I want us to notice that there's an inherent risk in Peter's words today and in our singing the song, "Oceans." This week, as I was doing research on the multitude of versions of Oceans, I read an article with the title: "Stop Singing *Oceans*" which of course I had to explore. And the basic point that Annie Downs makes is that we can't sing that song if we aren't ready to *actually live* the words that we're singing. The same is true of our scripture today. We shouldn't take the Peter's words for ourselves unless we're ready to step out of the boat. The danger in asking Jesus to command us to walk on water is that Jesus might do exactly that. The danger in singing "Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders," is that the Spirit may do exactly that.

And that can make us pretty uncomfortable at best and even in a sense of danger at worse. How big is your trust in Jesus? How far would you need to venture out to be

where your trust is without borders? Who would you need to talk to? What would you have to do? In the words of Annie Downs: “You are asking God to take you to where your trust has no borders. You know what that means? You have to leave your borders.” What does that look like to you? It could look like being kind to the mom no one else will talk to at T-ball practice. Or it could be asking that girl on a date even though you are scared. Or it could be standing up for your faith when your neighbor makes fun of Christians. Or it could be moving to a foreign country or less-affluent neighborhood or just moving to a different table at lunch. It can mean moving eight miles away from where you grew up where people may have a hard time seeing you as a pastor. It can mean moving a family’s furniture off a moving truck and into the garage at the parsonage and then into the parsonage a week later after church camp.

Do you know what it is like outside of the borders? It is wild. And unpredictable. And dangerous. Also? It’s exhilarating and life-giving and exactly the kind of brave people God wants us to be. And friends, for the past five years, we have been stepping out of the boat. We’ve been trying new things. We’ve been reaching beyond ourselves and into our communities. There have been times when we’ve had to cling to Jesus because it felt like we were sinking. But it’s my hope that through it all, our faith has been made stronger, in the presence of our Savior.” May we continue to have the courage to step out of the boat and sing our hearts out and grow in our faith so that our borders are expanded. Amen and amen.