

Flawed Yet Faithful sermon series  
Stepping Out on Faith – Matthew 14:22-33  
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Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I just read a scientific study that said people who breathe are at risk of dying. Apparently, the act of breathing air in and out repeatedly will, without a doubt, lead to death. For those of us who breathe, this is disturbing news. If this scientific study is to be believed, and I read it on the Internet so it must be true, then living has a 100% mortality rate. That's pretty scary, especially if you share the same sentiment as Woody Allen, who said, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve it by not dying." Well, too bad. For every single one of us, as this season of Lent reminds us, there will come a day that will be our last day. From dust we are made and to dust we shall return.

So the question is: What are we going to do with the days we have left? How can we make sure that the breaths we have between the one we are taking now and the last one we'll take will be used wisely? What will we let get in the way? Peter, the subject of our sermon series, is given new life when Jesus calls him to be a disciple, a chance to use his remaining breaths to follow Jesus. Peter is filled with a new courage to live life more fully, and yet, as we will see, it's his own fear that constantly gets in his way.

Fear is an awfully powerful motivator, isn't it? Fear can be healthy, but it can also keep us from doing a lot of things. Think about how the news preys on our fears: Why the food you eat may be dangerous! Why your appliances may not be safe! Why your cell phone signal is scrambling your brain! What's next? Too many Reese's Cups are bad for your health? Or think about how fear dictates what we drive. First there were lap belts. Then shoulder belts. Then both. Then anti-lock brakes. Then front airbags. Then side airbags. Then top and bottom airbags. Soon we'll be driving around strapped into a giant marshmallow. Fear is a powerful motivator and walking the line between prudence and paralysis can be difficult.

Author Elizabeth Kubler-Ross says that almost all the fears we experience in life can be boiled down to two basic, fundamental ones: the fear that we will not survive and the fear that we are not good enough. Afraid to take a lower-paying job that's more fulfilling? Fear of not making enough money to survive. Afraid to go out on a date or take a new class? Fear of not being good enough. Afraid to skydive? OK, that one is completely legit. But the fear of not surviving or not being good enough are the incapacitating forces that often keep us from taking risks.

That was certainly true for Peter in our story today. The disciples are out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, during the fourth watch of the night. That means the disciples had been rowing and bailing for up to nine hours, and had yet to make it across the sea. Why? Because the wind was against them. So, Jesus comes to them, walking on the water, saying to them, "Take heart, it is I, don't be afraid." Our hero Peter, always the most impulsive of the disciples, immediately asks to come to Jesus on the water. Jesus says, "Come." So, Peter steps out onto the water and begins to walk toward Jesus.

Now let's stop a second to take in what just happened. Peter is a normal, flawed human being like you and me. He's not Harry Houdini or David Blaine. He has no special powers of levitation or buoyance. Harry Potter has not waved his wand and said, "Wingardium Leviosa!" And yet, Peter steps out of a boat in the middle of a nasty squall and takes a few steps toward Jesus.

I've come to learn that there are two kinds of people in this world: sinkers and floaters. My Uncle Pete was a floater. He could lie on his back all day in his swimming pool, arms outstretched, floating on the top of the water. He'd perch his drink on his belly and just float. I tried to do that, but I'm a sinker and I wasted a good margarita. I learned to swim by flailing my arms and legs until I either made it to the other side of the pool or splashed all the water out of it. But I never could float like Uncle Pete. When I tried, I always ended up at the bottom of the pool, which I found out wasn't nearly as comfortable as the top.

We learn in our story that Peter is also a sinker. You know he floated for a second, right on top of the water. For a moment he was able to block out the howling winds around him and focus on Jesus. But just as quickly, he remembered the storm, he remembered the wind, he remembered that he was only human and couldn't actually walk on water, and he began to sink. In that instant, he was overcome by two powerful realizations: I'm not good enough to walk on water, and I'm not going to survive.

Now, some may look at this story and say that Peter failed, that his faith wasn't strong enough. "You know, if he had just kept his eye on Jesus, if he had just had more faith, he would have succeeded." But if those are the criteria, are any of us good enough? It's that fear of failure that can keep us from taking steps to grow our own faith. What if I start reading the Bible but don't understand it? What if I try to pray every day but can't keep it up? What if I serve as a deacon but accidentally skip a row while serving communion? What if I join the choir but miss a few notes? Sometimes it's easier just to stay in the boat, isn't it?

John Ortberg calls those kinds of people Boat Potatoes and says they are taking as much of a risk as those who try to walk on the water. There's a risk involved in everything, no matter how much we try to insulate ourselves. You could stay in bed all day, but you may be one of the half-million people who require emergency room treatment each year for injuries sustained while falling out of bed. You could shut your windows, but that may make you one of the ten people each year who accidentally hang themselves on the cords of their venetian blinds. If you're looking for safety, you've picked the wrong species. Just breathing is fatal. Staying in the boat is risky. Stepping out of the boat is risky. Everything is risky. Our fears will never go away. We are doomed to fail, and no one likes to be a failure.

But failure is not an event; it's a judgment about an event. And we control that judgment. You probably know Thomas Edison's quote about his futile attempts to invent the lightbulb: "I have not failed. I have just found 10,000 ways that did not work." Rather than being a negative, I believe failure is a positive, because it helps us know what to do differently next time. Failure is an essential part of the creative process. I was recently reading through some of the very first sermons I ever preached. Ugh. Painful. I can't believe my church in Chicago sat through them. I remember after one of those first ones, a few people clapped. I think it's because they were glad it was over!

Failure is how to choose to see something. When we contemplate taking the risk to grow and strengthen our faith, to make the most of the breaths we've been given, the worst failure is not to sink in the waves. The worst failure is never getting out of the boat. Jesus is not in the boat. Jesus is out on the water. To try and float, that is glorious. To try and sink, that is painful. But it is not failure. Failure is not trying at all.

So where do we find the courage to overcome our fear of failing? We have to find it somewhere, because our only other option is quitting. And let's be really honest here: It's ALWAYS tempting to quit. Quitting will always be the easier option. The greatest temptation we face when our plans fail is to surrender, to give up hope, and climb back into the boat.

But if we do that, we just may miss the call Jesus is extending to us to join him on the water. Courage is not the absence of fear; courage assumes fear is present, but that it isn't in control. Courage means keeping our eyes on Jesus in the presence of failure. It means taking the risk to leave the comfort and security of our boats to walk toward Jesus in our lives.

The story goes that after an unsuccessful attempt to climb Mt. Everest, Sir Edmund Hillary stood at the base, shook his fist, and said, "I'll defeat you yet! You're as big as you're going to get, but I'm still growing." Every time he tried to climb it, he failed. And every time he failed, he learned, he grew, and he tried again. And one day, he didn't fail.

I know, our Mt. Everests are pretty tall. And the boat is so warm and comfortable and familiar. But you can't walk on water if you never get out of the boat. If at first you don't succeed, big deal! It's usually the second, third, or fourth time you actually get it right. In my case, I'm still trying to get it right. Everybody fails. But everybody can grow, as well. And most often, that growth happens through failure, as Jesus reaches down and picks us up and gives us another chance to float.

What's keeping you in your boat? What's your reason for not risking more, for not stepping out in faith? Being willing to take risks means we choose to believe that God is with us during the storms, and that we choose to live our lives free from fear. Yes, we will doubt. Yes, we may sink at times. But by choosing faith over fear, we are daring to put our trust in the God who stills all storms, the God who calls us out of the boat and into the risky life of faith put into action each and every day. If you get out of the boat, there's a chance you'll sink. But if you stay in the boat, there's a 100% chance you won't walk on water.

I'm so thankful Peter showed us what courage looks like, even though he sank. At least he tried. Will you? This is your life. You can't step out of it. You can only live it or not live it. So, make that difficult call. Start that challenging project. Take that new class. Try that new hobby. Say "yes" to that new calling. What's the worst thing that can happen? You might fail. Or, you might float. Isn't a life fully lived for Jesus worth the risk?