

The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Mark 4:35-41

Learning to Pray*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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There was a common saying in the 1600s: “If a person does not know how to pray, let him go to sea, and that will teach him.”

A number of years ago, Michael and I were on vacation off the coast of Maine. On a whim, we decided to go on a guided sea kayaking trip. How lovely, we thought. Little did we know how hard it was for two landlubbers like us to navigate a small boat off the Atlantic coast – even on a clear, warm summer’s day. I certainly practiced my prayer skills that day! In fact, the trip was so intense that it took us several days to recover, both physically and emotionally. And we haven’t been kayaking since. I can only imagine what it would have been like to be in that kayak during the middle of a sudden storm.

For those of you who haven’t experienced open-sea kayaking, a comparable experience would be severe turbulence on an airplane. Once I was flying back to New York from Hong Kong. Now a sixteen-hour flight can be an ordeal in itself. But when we were passing over northern China, our plane hit a patch of rough turbulence that lasted for a good hour. The plane literally would not stop shaking for an hour. In that situation, there is absolutely nothing you can do (unless you are the pilot, of course), except to breathe slowly, to wait for the choppy air to pass – and to pray.

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In today’s gospel reading from Mark, Jesus and his disciples are stuck on a boat on the Sea of Galilee during a great windstorm. Although the Sea of Galilee is not a large body of water, it is quite deep – some 150 feet, in fact. What’s distinctive about the sea, however, is that the shoreline is 680 feet below sea level, and it is surrounded by mountains. Windstorms can suddenly arise as the wind on the shore travels up and down the mountains and creates downdrafts over the lake. Sometimes the waves that are formed can be as high as twenty feet!

Anyway, back to Jesus and his disciples. The waves are beating on the boat, and the boat is starting to get swamped. The disciples are terrified. And that’s really saying something given how many of them were fishermen by trade! But Jesus is sleeping soundly in the back of the boat on a cushion.

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The disciples wake Jesus up and say to him: “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” Hearing this, Jesus gets up and says to the wind and sea: “Peace! Be still!” And suddenly there is a dead calm. Jesus turns to the disciples and asks them: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And the disciples’ terror is suddenly transformed to awe. In amazement, they ask themselves who Jesus was – since even the wind and the sea obeyed him.

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In some ways, the past week for me has felt like being on a kayak off the coast of Maine, on an airplane over northern China, or on a boat in the Sea of Galilee during a windstorm. Rarely have I felt so helpless than from watching the news about our government’s “tender age shelters” – basically a euphemism for detention centers for babies and toddlers. Rarely have I been so horrified than from listening to a recording of a young child sobbing and repeatedly crying out “papa” and having no idea where his family is.

I still remember being lost in a department store – Mervyn’s – as a young child. I was playing under the clothes on a circular rack while my mom was shopping. When I emerged from under the rack, I couldn’t find her. Although my mom and I were only separated for a few minutes, it was a deeply frightening experience for me. If this one memory has stayed with me for nearly five decades, what effect would being torn apart from one’s family for weeks or months – or possibly forever – have on these children’s lives?

As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry recently said about the policy of separating immigrant families: “Concern for the stranger, the person, is a core obligation of why we are. . . . It is not good to separate a child from parents. You don’t need rocket science to know that. It runs against the very core of the message of Jesus of Nazareth.”

Even though the policy of separating immigrant families has supposedly ended, it is my understanding that the federal government still has no plans (and perhaps never had plans in the first place) to reunite parents with their children, some of whom are now separated by hundreds, if not thousands, of miles.

What can we do when the waves of moral evil are lapping up against the boats of our lives, and threatening to overturn the most basic values of our nation? What can we do when the turbulence of institutional sin is unrelenting and shaking our Christian values to their very core?

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Ralph Waldo Emerson, the 19th century New England poet and essayist, once wrote: “The wise person in the storm prays to God, not for safety from danger, but for deliverance from fear.”

Emerson is right. The point of praying in a windstorm is not so much about asking God to make the storm go away. Because sometimes the storm will not go away. In fact, sometimes the storm may become even stronger. The turbulence may become even more choppy. Things might actually get worse. Rather, the point of prayer, as Emerson says, is to ask God to deliver us from our fear.

Each of us has waves in our lives that threaten to overwhelm us. For some, it might be the loss of a job. For others it might be grief over the death of a loved one. For still others it might be mental or physical health challenges. Like the moral evil of the family separation policy that has engulfed our nation in the past few weeks, these are the waves that threaten to capsize the boats of our lives.

Today's gospel from Mark is not just about the physical miracle of Jesus calming the storm. Rather, it is about the *spiritual* miracle that, through our prayers, Jesus can – and will – calm the turbulent waves of our lives. Jesus is a reminder of just how much we are loved by God, and how God will never abandon us – even to the point of death on a cross. Because nothing can ever separate us from this love, we ultimately have nothing to fear. Thus, through our prayers, Jesus will bring us from a place of fear to a place of calm. And this, in turn, gives us the courage to act with conviction and to make the world a better place.

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Forty-nine years ago, a small group of people in a gay bar on Christopher Street in the West Village decided that they were fed up with the constant fear of police harassment and raids. So when the Stonewall Inn was raided during the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, these people – which included homeless youth and drag queens of color – fought back. It was sort of a “David versus Goliath” moment, as we heard in today's Old Testament reading. This single act of resistance sparked the Stonewall riots, which in turn sparked the modern-day LGBTQ rights movement. We remember this *kairos* moment each year on Pride Sunday, the last Sunday in June.

A number of us will be marching this afternoon in the New York City Pride March to commemorate Pride Sunday. We will be meeting in the garden at 2:00 and walking to the gathering site for the diocesan contingent in Chelsea. If you are free, please come and join us – all are welcome. But if you are unable to join us, please pray for us. For prayer is one of the most powerful things that we can do to support other people.

In the end, we need to be realistic – there's probably not a lot that we can do about many of the waves in our lives. Some waves are simply too large. Others are simply beyond our control. But there *is* something that all of us can do. We can all pray. We can all awaken the sleeping Jesus, who dwells within our hearts, through the power of prayer. And we can all be reminded of how much we are loved by a God who will

never abandon us, thus delivering us from our fears. Moving from fear to faith – and calming the waves – is just a prayer away.

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