

'Something There is That Doesn't Love a Wall': God's Welcome Table and Our Call to Inclusion¹

July 29, 2018

I

Well, OK. This morning's Gospel is actually two stories: Jesus' feeding of 5,000 with barley loaves and fish, known as the miracle of the loaves and fishes told across the Gospels. And then after Jesus flees the crowds who are mobbing Him, fleeing to the mountain to pray, He senses that his disciples are in big trouble in a boat that was already out to sea. So Jesus then walks on the water to save them from peril, saying to them, "It is I. Do not be afraid." Two stories that actually belong together in any case.

In fact, this little boat story is stuck right smack in the middle of Jesus' healings and teachings – I mean, it's a bit of a puzzle tacking on this walking on water ... this, "It is I, do not be afraid."

So let me puzzle you a bit further, before we try to unravel it all to find the meaning beneath these stories.

Robert Frost wrote, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." He says "before I built a wall, I'd ask to know what I was walling in ... or walling out. And to whom I was like to give offense. Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down."

So now – puzzling – you're probably sitting there thinking what does Frost have to do with feeding of the starving crowd? What does Frost have to do with this puzzling little story about Jesus walking on water to save His terrified followers? Well, the answer is ... actually I think quite a bit! So let's unravel it all ... let's see.

Now the boat since ancient times has symbolized the church, hasn't it? You know, that craft that carries us through all the choppy seas of life. And ... oh you know, there's a lot of focus on the church these days ... hyped occasionally with stories in the press ... you know, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians always and all. ... Up in arms about this and that. Who's in, who's out, who can celebrate, who has to sit in the back, who has to hide, who's welcome, who's suspect. Or in other words ... who's in the boat? Who is in that boat?

Well, let's look at that boat scene here a little more closely. See this particular, puzzling little story is also found in Matthew and Mark. As Matthew tells it, Jesus makes His disciples go on ahead. ... Seems he wants to be alone – like John's story here – wants to go on retreat, spend some time in prayer. But then again, he seems to sense that His followers are "battered by the waves." And so He comes toward them,

near them, in that wee morning hour ... that hour when ghosts are seen, when the air is liminal and thin, where ghosts, and spirits, and the spirit of God break through.

So maybe gripping their oars, they're on guard against all the things that go bump in the night. But now they glimpse Jesus anyway ... like a ghost in the dark ... glimpsing Him right off the bow. And their hearts are terrified. But then He says, "Take heart ... it's I" ... like maybe ... take My heart, cause it's big enough for all of us ... and don't be afraid. And then next as Matthew tells it – after Peter's show of little faith, Jesus climbs into the boat with them.

Well again ... who is them? Who's in that boat?

II

Alice Walker wrote a short story entitled, "Welcome Table." And in that story, Walker brings an old black woman to an all white country church – to that "welcome table" where Christians are called to worship. And although wretchedly poor, she's wearing her best Sunday-go-to-meeetin' clothes: a torn, black, mildewing dress, and a greasy, faded silk scarf tied around her hair. Although ancient, she's staggered down a country road half a mile from her house, drawn by the glittering cross that crowns the church's steeple ... drawn by her desire to come to the Welcome Table on the Lord's day.

But now what makes this simple act simply intolerable is that, forgetful and nearly blind with age, she's come to the wrong church! The wrong church! Blind to the color barrier that divides her entire world, she breaks a boundary and destroys the peace.

Well, the pastor meets her at the door and "kindly" says, "Auntie, you know this is not your church?" But after brushing him off she makes her way up to the front pew ... humming a hymn inside her head. Well, pretty soon, a young, blond usher comes forth and whispers, "Grannie ... you gotta leave. ... " But she also bats him away. And she keeps on singing to God inside her head. Well, finally, a few good ladies' husbands slip their arms under hers, yank her up bodily, and "help" her roughly out the door.

And then the congregation resumes their singing and praying about God's impartial love ... and feel all the better about themselves.

Now the story ends when the old woman continues down the road and sees something "interesting" and "delightful" coming toward her. 'Cause see, coming down the highway at a leisurely pace is Jesus – looking for all the world like the Jesus she's seen in the good shepherd picture she once stole from a white lady she worked for. So He was wearing sandals and a beard and had long, light brown hair – parted on the right side. And His eyes were sad but joyful, and His face glowed like it had a candle burning behind it. And all He said when He got up close was, "It is I. Do not be afraid. Follow me."

So then she bounded down to his side with all the bob and speed of one so old. And for every one of His steps she took two ... and she sang and told Him all about her hard life, and she sang, and hummed ...

and skipped some more ... and told Him how she'd just gotten tossed out of their church. ... And now how she was so happy to be walking out on that highway with Jesus.

Well, Jesus just smiled and they walked on. Now she didn't know where they were going but knew ... she knew it would be wonderful. And so they kept walking and looking at the trees and at the sky beyond the trees ... and on and on they walked ... without stopping.

Well, later, most of the folks in that church heard that sometime that afternoon that old colored gal fell dead along the highway. And silly as it seemed, it appeared she'd walked herself to death. Alice Walker wrote: "Now many of the black families along the road said they'd seen that old lady highsteppin' down the highway; sometimes jabbering in a low voice, sometimes singing, sometimes just gesturing wildly with her hands. Gazing at the sky. She'd been all alone ... they said. But now some of them wondered aloud where that old woman had been going so stoutly and they said that maybe her old heart just plum gave out. Some guessed maybe she had relatives across the river. ... but none of them really knew."

III

Well, who's in the church? Who's in that boat? Who's in, who's out? Who's outside the walls? Who are we walling in and walling out?

John's Gospel here, as well as Matthew's, says that the disciples' hearts were frightened ... showed little faith, really ... even though Jesus said "take heart." See, they still didn't understand about the loaves, about the kingdom, about Jesus, who He was ... and I guess they were astounded all right, but their hearts were frail and they were frightened when Jesus drew near. 'Cause I guess they were frightened about what they saw.

See, apparently they had heart conditions. They were crippled ... handicapped with doubt. And so they used what they had left to survive the storm as best they could, to row and row and row. See, it was all they knew how to do. And so they were set to do it all night if need be.

What they were not prepared to do was to see their Lord hiking toward them across the Sea of Galilee – unsummoned, traveling in a most unorthodox way in the middle of the night. See, it didn't fit their assumptions; it violated all their categories. He couldn't have surprised them more if He'd come to them as an arthritic old man with yellow teeth, or as an obviously disturbed stranger asking directions around town, or ... in the guise of an old black woman with a mildewy rag dress as her Sunday best.

See, I think this passage speaks to scared disciples in every age ... to the church as a storm-tossed ship on a hostile sea. And I think what's significant here. ... what's really significant is that what struck terror in their hearts was the presence of God. They thought it was a ghost. They didn't recognize Him – even

after He got into their boat. Oh, they worshiped Him there OK; after all He's just saved their skins. But as the whole Gospel story turns out ... they still really didn't get it.

So here's my question. What about you and me? See, for us I think the Lord does pass by ... and passes near ... in various ways. The Lord opens doors, and asks you to look and see. 'Cause His spirit is in our midst, and it can be scary because He blows away our minds! Blows away our customs! Blows away our assumptions! Our prejudices. He fills our sails and swells our vision ... He enlarges our life.

So finally, who is in that boat? And where's it going? Well, I think all you and I finally know is that we're going with God ... we're going with God ... like that black lady skippin' down the road, bobbing along and singing her heart out ... running into the wind.

Jesus says, "Take heart, it is I. Do not be afraid." And the wind ceases, and we're astonished, 'cause we didn't get it about the loaves, didn't get it about the wind or anything.

But here's the thing. Even though our hearts are still frail, He still gets into that boat with you and me anyway ... keeps climbing into that boat over and over again ... with heart enough to spare.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall. That wants it down." Thanks be to God.

Amen.

¹ Resources Used: *John* by Gerard Sloyan; *Mark* by Lamar Williamson; and *Matthew* by Douglas R. A. Hare (all Interpretation series); Synthesis for July 29, 2018.