

YOU SAY POTATO AND I SAY POTĀTO; YOU SAY TOMATO, I SAY TOMĀTO.
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Scriptures:

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. ²⁶But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. ²⁷But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

²⁸Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." ²⁹He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. ³⁰But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" ³¹Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" ³²When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. ³³And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." Matthew 14:22--33 (NRSVA)

Sermon:

We truly live in a time of amazing and wondrous things, don't we? We often refer to the drugs and surgical procedures and gadgets that save and bless our lives loosely as miracles. Yet others would call such things the works of the devil, which demonstrate humankind's lack of confidence in God's healing power and presence, and many of our gadgets just notable examples of human decadence, pride, and arrogance. Well, you say potato and I say potāto; you say tomato, I say tomāto.

I like what Bishop Augustine of Hippo, or St. Augustine to many, said some 1600 years ago, when he wrote that "*Miracles are not a contradiction of nature. They are only in contradiction to what we know of nature.*" Therefore, given that I am a product of my time, Augustine's insights are helpful to me. I say this because I don't ask such questions of scriptures such as did this or that thing really happen. I tend to ask what did these amazing and wondrous stories like we've heard today mean to the people that first heard them and how were they used to benefit their communities of faith?

In Matthew's Hellenistic urban church, comprised mainly of Jewish, Jesus-confessors, there were several major issues. The biggest issue being the credibility of Jesus as "the" or "a" son of God-Messiah for Matthew's Jewish constituents and what this would have meant for those non-Israelite or Gentile believers in his church. Other issues would have centered on various understandings of the Mosaic Laws and the inclusion of a growing number of non-Israelites in the community of faith.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus was not portrayed as God in the flesh as in John's Gospel. In Matthew, Jesus was like Moses and the other great prophets of biblical lore, who meditated or channeled God's power and presence for God's people. However, Jesus was unique and one of a kind in the annuals of Israel's prophets and far, far greater than any before him. Such holy people in Israel were referred to, along with the kings, as sons of God or anointed ones. Therefore, keep in mind Jesus' similarities to Moses, Elijah, and Elisha, and their conflicts with

the ruling establishment, the people; their wondrous feats, especially relating to water, along with several of their unusual deaths or not.

I must also mention that in the Hellenistic world, concepts like a son or sons of god were associated with those people who were set apart from the ordinary by divine favor or commission, and understood as divine heroes. These people were so empowered by the gods even nature could refuse them nothing. Pythagoras is the first one of these so-called divine men in Greek folklore that come to mind.

Thus, it is to these ends of seeing Jesus as the ultimate holy one of God that we must take in to account the amazing and wondrous things associated with him, particularly things like his rebuking storms and walking on water.

Jesus' first disciples had hoped he was the long-awaited liberator, messiah, warrior-priest-king. Many of Jesus' disciples, even after his crucifixion, understood that his ministry had only been interrupted; he was going to return soon, reconvene them, and resume his mission.

Subsequently, these expectations ran into a brick wall called the Jewish Rebellion of 66-70 C.E., when the Great Jerusalem Temple and all that it meant in the messianic scheme of things was destroyed and an estimated million plus Jews were killed and hundreds of thousands more sold into slavery. It was also during this time that the community of Jesus-followers in Jerusalem disappeared. So, in Matthew's day, circa 85 C.E., the question was, considering Jesus' crucifixion, his resurrection, the destruction of the Temple, but especially, his delay in returning, how does one understand Jesus as the Messiah, and Savior of his people?

Matthew concluded that Jesus, as the Messianic hope, was to be found in his being the paragon or incarnation of the spirit of the Mosaic Laws rightly understood and practiced. Thus, living holy, righteous lives as Jesus taught would usher in the kingdom. Jesus, then, was a new law-giver, one like Moses only greater as we will see. Jesus will return to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven, but only after God's elect, scattered throughout the nations, have had an opportunity to hear the Good News. So, disciples go ye therefore into all nations.

In the in-between time, while Jesus is physically absent, the church must hold on, never doubt, don't be distressed, don't be overly anxious, and don't try to take matters into its own hands based solely upon human understandings because that which was in Jesus, God's spirit, will be with the Church to keep and guide it.

Peter is a major character in the Gospel of Matthew, and is frequently portrayed as impulsive, foolishly brave, or engaging his mouth long before he does his brain. Peter had brilliant insights but seemed to vacillate in his own understandings of Jesus. Peter is even seen as a satanic influence in Matthew 16 as he attempted to dissuade Jesus from his course. And, during the darkest hours of Jesus' life and ministry, Peter was a coward and deserter. However, later in Matthew, Peter is rehabilitated and his insight that Jesus was truly the son of the living God becomes the foundation upon which Matthew and his church are built and live.

Turning to our text. Jesus has finally left the crowd. He wanted to go up a mountain to be alone. I think possibly he still needed to grieve John the Baptist's death; but, primarily, he went away to pray, revealing his dependency upon God as he tried to discern what was next.

Jesus had sent his disciples ahead in a boat across the Sea of Galilee to some prearranged place. Please note there is no indication that there was a threatening or dangerous storm in our text, only strong head winds that impeded the disciple's progress. Suddenly there appeared, walking on the water, what the disciples take to be an apparition. Evil spirits were known to whip up the winds and cause storms.

The disciples, some of whom were rough and tough, life-long fishermen, became worried and greatly distressed, when they saw the figure on the water. (The Greek word used here, *ταράσσω*, *tarassō*, does not mean frightened or terrified, it simply means agitated, distressed.)

Well, who wouldn't be agitated and distressed seeing what they believed was a demon coming towards them? We may speculate that with the disciples' delay, Jesus must have grown concerned and went in search of them. Jesus spoke and told the disciples not to be worried or distressed, be of good courage, and take heart, because it was he.

Now, let's keep in mind that the disciples at this point have seen many amazing and wondrous things associated with Jesus. They had earlier witnessed Jesus dealing with the forces of a dangerous and terrifying storm in chapter 8 that saved their lives. However, there are many differences in the two stories and what happens. One difference being that in chapter 8, Jesus rebuked or subdued the storm, causing the disciples in the boat to be ²⁷... *amazed, saying, 'What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?'* In today's story, however, Jesus did not interact with the forces of nature, the wind or the water, he simply walked on the water, he calmly trampled on the back of the demonic as it were. After rescuing Peter, and getting him back in the boat, the winds simply ceased. But, this time we hear, ³³*And those in the boat worshiped him [a better translation would be they showed him great honor or deference as their master, and now clearly identify what kind of man Jesus was by] saying, "Truly you are ["God's son or a son of God]."*

I want to point out that in the ancient mind, there was a big difference between a holy man or divine man rebuking a storm demon and his trekking across the top of the water. To this point, water in the ancient world was symbolic of not only life but also chaos and disorder and only the gods or in the case of the Israelites, God could give life, order, or tame chaos as we read in the opening verses of Genesis 1. Also, whereas God in Moses, Elijah, Elisha, and even Joshua parted the waters of either the Red Sea or the Jordan River, God's power and presence in Jesus was far greater because Jesus walked on the water and dominated it.

Traditionally our scriptures have been interpreted to indicate that if Peter would have had enough faith; if he had kept his eyes on Jesus and had not become distracted either by the storm or his apparent ability to walk on water, he would have continued on to Jesus and not almost drowned.

I think this interpretation lacks sufficient insights into the culture of the early Christian communities that preserved this story. I say this in part because Peter's action ran so contrary to the collective mindset of the time and place. Therefore, let us not view this story through the lenses of modern, western, guilt-oriented individualism but through the collective mindset of the ancients. Matthew was after all writing to a church, a collective, about its survival and prosperity. Matthew told his church to live in the knowledge that God is present, cares about, and knows the church's needs even in stormy and demonic times. If the church keeps faith with God as Jesus taught and demonstrated, it will be saved from the forces of chaos and even from its own errors and failures just as Jesus saved Peter from his.

To all this I add, I believe Peter was bound to sink, as will all those who presume upon the domain of the holy with selfish intent. Did you ever wonder why Peter just didn't stay in a perfectly good boat that was in no danger of sinking and wait for Jesus to come to him and the others? I'll tell you why, Peter wanted to walk on the water and go to Jesus. In the minds of Jesus' audiences and some in Matthew's, Peter's stepping out of the boat and leaving his fellow disciples broke faith with his group in order to seek his own aggrandizement. Peter played the fool in his honor-shame based culture by wanting to be greater than his allotted role as a disciple or student by being like Jesus, his master and God's divine broker and Messianic agent of change.

Folks, we got'ta see that Peter here was revealing a demonic dimension to his faith and anyone's faith, who tries to goad God into giving them a miracle by doing stupid stuff or for personal aggrandizement. I say this so bluntly, because there was no reason for Peter to leave

the boat. Also, this incident seems reminiscent of Satan tempting Jesus to pull a stupid stunt by jumping off one of the pinnacles of the Temple in Matthew 4. Only in our story today, Peter jumped; that is, he jumped out of the boat.

Now, one of the first tip offs for the earliest groups of Jesus-followers that something was squirrely in this story, I believe, would have been Peter's question to Jesus, "Is it you Lord," as if you could have trusted a demon to tell you the truth! Jesus' one-word response to Peter, "Come" was the opposite of his one word response, "Go!" spoken to the demons that he cast out of the Gadarene demonic into a herd of swine. Peter evidently took a few presumptuous steps but then in fear, here the Greek word really means fear as opposed to distress, and he began to sink. (*φοβέω, phobeō* as opposed to *ταράσσω, tarassō*)

I have often wondered, given this non-traditional take on our text today, if Jesus' word "Come" could be seen as the occasion for not only Peter, but the Church's and others like Peter, in receiving an object lesson about divine-human boundaries and limitations. And, Jesus' statement "You of little faith" may not have been so much an assessment of Peter's lack of faith for not being able to walk on the water but to his getting out of the boat in the first place. Also, could Jesus' statement about Peter's lack of faith simply be an obvious observation of a natural outcome? The natural outcome when humans presume upon the purview of the divine. Well, you say potato and I say potāto; you say tomato, I say tomāto.

Some New Testament scholars also think Peter's getting out of the boat to pursue his own interests sends a message to Matthew's church regarding those Jesus-followers, who had abandoned the ways of the Christ to join the militant forces in the rebellion, but wanted to rejoin Matthew's Jesus community and were meeting with resistance. Thus, if impulsive Peter was saved and rehabilitated so could those who once abandoned the ways of Christ and the Church to pursue what we today would call militant nationalism. So, let them back in the boat!

In Matthew's church, as with many of Jesus' disciples across the ages, there have always been those who have wavered in their understandings of Jesus, his nature, and God's presence in him. Sometimes the Church has been deeply troubled and distressed over such matters, at other times, sadly, not. There have been times when the Church has accommodated outside social, political, and religious forces to its detriment, and at other times eschewed anything and everyone from the outside to its detriment. There have been times when the Church went far beyond its purview, presuming upon God's domain, and has met with disastrous results.

The boat of the Church has seen and will see more rough seas; it has had holes punched in it, rammed by governments, philosophy, science, and other religions. At times, its anchor in Christ seems to have been dislodged and drug across the seabed. Nevertheless, and regardless of all that the forces of chaos have thrown at it, it is still afloat. It will remain afloat if its people in moments of distress do not lose focus on God's abiding presence made known in the Gospel of Jesus the Christ. Furthermore, the Church must not seek to arrogate to itself powers that belong only to God or attempt to provoke God's hand as Peter did no matter how worthy it believes its political, social, economic, or religious causes to be or how much it wants to increase its stature and importance in the eyes of the world.

To this latter point, remember that the Zealots had tried to provoke God's intervention on behalf of God's people with horrible outcomes. All of this would have been fresh in Matthew's mind. Therefore, it is imperative that the Church and its people, like Jesus, go up the mountain often and earnestly pray to discern God's will before acting, lest they, or the Church, play the fool as did Peter and nearly drown.

As I look at the dwindling number of Christians in this nation, a drowning Church as it were, I can't help but correlate this phenomenon to people's shallow, incessant, and

presumptuous need for sensationalism, self-aggrandizing charismatic, religious experiences, idolatrous individualism, and an un-reflected upon appetite for supernaturalism.

In summary, I think Matthew was telling his church and its people that God is with them, hold tight, don't lose faith, keep your hearts and minds firmly anchored in God's power and witness in Christ - stay in the boat! Don't accommodate the social and religious forces at work in your world that would compromise the centrality of God's will and presence in Jesus, the son of the living God - stay in the boat! But, especially, Church and members, do not try to provoke God to rescue some foolish, un-reflected upon notions of Christianity or personal piety.

I remind us one more time that some say Peter equivocated in his faith - he doubted - and nearly drowned. Others say he played the fool and sought to increase his own status by provoking God into giving him a miracle and nearly drowned. Either way, let us hear Peter once again, regardless of his motivation or the various interpretations, when he says "*Lord save me!*" Lord, save me, save the Church from forces beyond our control and from foolish, human presumptions.

But then again, you say potato and I say potāto; you say tomato, I say tomāto. No matter how you pronounce them, they are both good food and nourishment.

Bibliography

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