

Proper 14A
The Rev. Dr. Paul J. Carling

Trinity Episcopal Church
August 13, 2017

Falling off a Bicycle
Matthew 13: 22-33

It's hard not to love Peter, isn't it? Every time there's an easy way to do something, he chooses the hard way. Peter reminds me of the Buddhist student who thought he could reach enlightenment by relying on himself. So he said goodbye to his teacher, took the ferry across the wide river, and went to live alone in a cave high in the hills. There he prayed non – stop for 25 years.

Finally, he emerged, stretched like he'd waken from a long sleep, climbed down to the river's edge, stepped into the water, and started walking across the huge distance back to the monastery. His teacher, now very old, his vision failing, was sitting and doing the laundry with another monk. They watched as the man slowly made his way across the river. *"Who is that?"* the teacher asked. The other monk said, *"That's the student you had 25 years ago, the one who's spent all these years praying in a cave. And look – he can walk on water!"* To which the teacher replied, *"What a pity... the ferry only costs a quarter."*

Still there's something wonderfully familiar about Peter, isn't there? Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor describes Peter this way, *"... full of faith one minute and full of doubt the next, riding high on his confidence in Jesus one moment, and lying in the dirt the next. Through all his ups and downs, all his great moments and his awful ones... he's the disciple who takes risks, who makes great leaps of faith, and stumbles as often as not, but keeps brushing himself off and getting up to try, try again... What you see is what you get with (Peter) – an impetuous, outspoken man who both loves Jesus and lets him down, who richly deserves Jesus' judgment, but who also desperately needs his grace."*

Just like all of us when our confidence looms larger than reality. Like a toddler taking her first steps, Peter keeps his footing by focusing on the waiting arms of a loving parent. But then he notices the strong wind pushing him and his friends into deeper waters, and suddenly he realizes he's defying the laws of gravity. The "Rock" begins to sink like a stone.

Like the first time I ever rode a two wheeler bike – my ticket to a whole new world. The night before, I dreamed of lifting my feet onto the pedals, and riding long and hard, the wind in my hair, invincible. Well, I lasted on that bike just about as long as Peter did walking on water. With the first big bump, my heart was in my mouth, the wheels started to wobble, and soon, the bike – and I – lay sprawled on the ground.

Hitting that first bump made me doubt myself, and like Peter, that was the moment I lost it. And of course, as we grow up, life gets very complicated, and every serious bump invites new doubts.

Especially in times of large and repeated bumps, of fundamental challenges to our Christian identity. In Jesus' time it was socially acceptable to think that other races, other ethnicities, the "other," was inferior, worthy of scorn, worthy even of exclusion and violence. We've spent decades, millennia, growing into people who understand how the social sins of racism and sexism and homophobia erode our souls, and fracture the body of Christ.

We thought we had it figured out. Yet, talk about bumps. We've now entered a time where suddenly, it's socially acceptable again to march through the streets calling for hate, for mass deportation, for violence against Jews, people of color, people with different sexual orientations or political views, anyone who the marchers see as different. The global beacon of freedom and welcome to all, the Statue of Liberty, is now defaced with bumper stickers chock full of obscenities with a picture of America that says, *"We are full."*

And too often, these causes are justified by some torturous misreading of Jesus' Good News. Somehow, his love command has been surgically removed in the place of a viscous hate – filled sense of judgment. No wonder so many of our fellow Americans doubt the value of religion. And that so many of us wonder, *"Where is God in all of this?"*

Why do we doubt? Because having doubts is as natural as having a brain and a heart. *"Why do we doubt?"* Taylor asks. *"Because we're afraid, because the sea is so vast and we're so small, because the storm is so powerful and we're so easily sunk, because life is beyond our control and we're so helpless in its grip. Why do we doubt? Because we're afraid even when we do have faith. We don't have none, we have some. Like Peter we have a little, and a little is better than nothing, even though there are times when it hardly seems enough to save us."*

"This is why we need Jesus," Taylor goes on. *"This is why we shouldn't be caught dead in the water – or on land – without him. Our fears and our doubts may paralyze us, but they're also what makes us cry out for his saving touch. If we never sank – if we were all like that Buddhist student who could walk on the water just fine by himself – we wouldn't need a savior."*ⁱⁱ

The good news, my friends, is that God doesn't expect some kind of superhero faith that never falters; God doesn't expect us to never have doubts. God just asks that, when we fall – as we always do – that we simply get up, dust ourselves off, and get back on the bicycle of faith again.

Because Jesus, if anything, is practical. He doesn't promise to take the storm away. He doesn't promise that life will somehow become easy if we follow him. He simply promises to be with us every step of the way. And the miracle is that, when we start to believe that... even a little, our fears begin to evaporate. As we navigate the storms of life, Jesus, standing on the only solid ground there is, calls out to us. *"Take heart, and do not be afraid. It is me."*

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor (2004). "Saved by Doubt" in *The Seeds of Heaven*, Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, pp. 56-57.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, pp. 59-60.