

Staying focused

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 13, 2017.

When he began to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Matthew 14:30

Some years ago I became involved in local community theatre and liked to say that I was following in the footsteps of my son who was involved with small theatre productions in Chicago and New York. One of my early roles in community theatre was Jacob in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. At first, I was flattered that I was sought out for the role but my suspicions were confirmed when I learned that several others had turned it down before I was approached!

You just heard the story from the Book of Genesis that centers on the seventeen year old Joseph who is the youngest of Jacob's twelve sons. His brothers are jealous of Joseph who is favored by Jacob who has given him a beautiful coat of many colors. Joseph's favored status is too much for his brothers and they conspire against him with a plot to kill him and dump him into a pit. Joseph's life is eventually spared by one of his brothers and they sell him to a caravan of Ishmaelites who take him into Egypt.

There is a great deal more to the saga, but the issue at this point in the narrative is that God doesn't play favorites. All are welcome in God's realm. There is no distinction with regard to gender, sexuality, nationality or color. Nor are there any entitlements. There is nothing we can do to earn God's grace that is given freely to us out of love. We must stay focused on what we can give rather than what we can get.

Staying focused is the centerpiece of the story of Jesus appearing to walk on water. The disciples are terrified at the sight and when Jesus invites Peter to join him, Peter steps out of the boat and onto the water but when he is distracted by the stormy winds he loses concentration and begins to sink. When he cries out for help Jesus reaches out to save him. The point is that if Peter had more faith and did not succumb to doubt he would not have faltered and gotten that sinking feeling.

What actually happened in this story we don't know. It has been speculated that Jesus was actually walking in shallow water and only appeared to be walking on the water. While this miracle story may seem implausible, it is the vehicle that conveys the message about having faith and confidence. To take this story literally or try to analyze it with explanations is to miss the point. What is essential in this story is keeping our focus on Christ. When Peter is distracted by the stormy wind he loses his focus and begins to sink. Peter's hesitation is a loss of faith that allows his doubts and fears to distract him.

When I was learning to swim, I was reasonably confident until I got in over my head at which point I would lose my nerve. The same is true with gymnasts on a balance beam who must be intensely focused and not allow themselves to be distracted, causing them to lose their balance and fall. It is essential for us to remain focused on the vision of our mission to be the visible presence of Christ in the world.

Staying focused requires a single-minded faith undeterred by distractions and doubts. When we reach the point where we lose faith and begin to panic and don't know which way to turn, we cry out for help. When we are willing to take risks, the best way to succeed is to stay focused on our objective and purpose. If we falter, we reach out to grasp the outstretched hand of God who encourages us to regain our confidence.

We must not be afraid to take risks. One of the keys to success includes a willingness to risk failure. It may seem odd to say this, but anything worth doing is worth the risk of doing it poorly. If our objective is important enough, we have to be willing to risk failure and learn from our mistakes and failures. This is the first step toward ultimate success.

God expects us to climb out of our complacency and the security of the familiar into the unknown. At every new point in our lives we take risks. When we go off to school, start a new job, get married and raise a family, each time we leave the familiar patterns of our lives and adjust to the challenge of new circumstances and surroundings. Whether we succeed or fail depends on our ability to remain focused on our objective. Focusing on the presence of Christ within enables us to take necessary risks.

Think of the brave explorers, inventors and research scientists who established new frontiers in the advancement of knowledge and technology. Their success was due to remain focused on their vision of a new concept that led to new discoveries and inventions. In the mid-nineteenth century an assortment of young Americans went to Paris to live and be inspired in the creative arts. One of those young Americans was Samuel F.B. Morse who went to Paris to learn to paint. By the time he returned home he had developed plans for the telegraph that made communication possible over long distances. Had he not remained focused, he would not have succeeded in reaching his goal of developing that new technology.

Among the most difficult people to live and work are those who cast a negative pall over new idea or proposal, insisting that they won't work. They expect things will go wrong and blow things out of proportion by turning minor mishaps into major crises. The behavior of those who criticize and complain can be changed by our reaction to them.

It is quite possible that young children today will live into the 22nd century and all that it will bring. They will be part of new discoveries that most of us today can only imagine. If they stay focused on the possibilities of what can be done, they will not falter. My hope is that they can learn more than what can be found on line or in books and classrooms. They need to be taught to be kind, to offer companionship to the lonely, to encourage those in need, and to have an awareness of others, encouraging their better qualities. If you find yourself losing focus, the outstretched hand of God is there to encourage and guide you.