

Asleep on the Cushion

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

June 21, 2015

Text: Mark 4:35-41

Whenever I read this story from the Gospel of Mark, I think about my dad and the boat we had on the lake where our summer house was in northwestern Pennsylvania. Dad loved the lake and he loved that boat and was especially proud of the special seat cushions that would float in case of emergency. Or so he said. I don't know if they did because he never let me try to see if they would float. "They'll get dirty," he would say.

"How can they get dirty if I throw them in the lake?" I'd ask, my 10 year old bravado kicking in.

"Because they'd get all wet and the dirt would stick to them. That's the end of it." And when my dad said that, it was.

I needed to know where those floating cushions were when Dad and I would take the boat out on the lake in the evening. This was my dad's favorite time to go out in the boat, and practically the only time since my brothers used the boat all day every day for water skiing with their friends. But as evening rolled around they headed off to girlfriends and summer jobs leaving the boat tied at the dock. So, once in a while after dinner, Dad would decide to take a cruise around the lake and I would get to go. I loved it because, unlike my brothers who were always trying to see just how fast they could get the boat going, Dad would just cruise

along at a nice even pace, trying to leave as small a wake as possible. It would be quiet and peaceful with just the gentle lapping of the waves on the fiberglass hull. The sun would set while Dad and I just floated along, letting the earliest stars of dusk become visible in the night sky. But, this was when I would start to get scared because as long as I can remember, I have been afraid of being around bodies of water at night. Terrified actually. I would be terrified that somehow I would end up in that inky black water fighting for my life. I don't know why I was so afraid this would happen because it never did. Not even close. It just seemed like it could too easily.

But then I'd look at my Dad and he'd be smiling and so happy, just cruising along watching the stars come out. I wasn't so scared then because I just knew I'd always be safe with my Dad. I knew he'd never do anything that would put me in danger. So, if we were out in the boat on the lake in the dark, then it had to be safe. I realized that if I looked up at the stars and not down at the dark water, I wasn't so scared. Then, before I knew it, we were almost back at the dock. "Get ready to reach!" he'd yell to me and I knew we'd made it back okay once more. We'd tie up at the dock and then I'd help him cover the boat because perish forbid those floating seat cushions get a little dew on them!!!

I knew I could trust my Dad and I did. That's how I learned to overcome my fear of being on the water in the dark. That's how

I learned to overcome a lot of fears and misgivings and I bet many of you have had similar experiences with your Dad's. What are some of those memories? What did your Dad teach you about overcoming your fears? What did your Dad inspire you to do that you thought you couldn't do? [*pause for responses*]

Fear is a key aspect to this story in Mark when Jesus and the disciples encounter a storm while in a boat crossing a lake one evening. Things start out smooth enough, so smooth in fact that Jesus falls asleep in the boat, his head on a cushion. Clearly Jesus was not afraid to be in a boat on a lake in the dark like I was! And then, my worst nightmare happened and I'm guessing the disciples weren't too thrilled either. A major windstorm blew up and tossed the boat about on the waves, threatening to swamp them at any minute. Jesus slept through it all, confounding the terrified disciples. They must have been thinking, "he's got to wake up soon! How can anyone sleep through this?" But he just kept sleeping. Finally, they couldn't take it any longer so they woke him up. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" they screamed over the howling wind. Finally Jesus wakes up and shouts, "Peace! Be still!" The winds ceased and the waters became completely calm, totally freaking out the disciples. "Who is this that even the wind and the seas obey him?" they ask each other.

"Peace! Be still!" That's what Jesus said but did he say it to the storm on the lake OR was he saying it to the disciples? We

always assume he was commanding the storm to cease and the water to calm, but what if he was really telling the disciples to calm down? What if he could tell that the storm wasn't really that bad and that they were just letting their fears get the better of them? What if he knew that if they calmed down, they could handle whatever came their way in strong winds and choppy seas? What if the real miracle in this story wasn't Jesus miraculously calming a storm at sea? What if the miracle of this story was Jesus calming down the disciples so they could regain their confidence in themselves and each other? What if the real miracle is that Jesus transformed the disciples from terrified on-lookers to competent, skilled boatmen which surely the fishermen in their midst must have been? What if what Jesus really did here was transform fear into faith – the kind of faith that enables a person to stare down any situation because they know God is with them in the midst of whatever is coming their way?

Peace. Be still. Surely those are words of Jesus we need to hear this week in the aftermath of the shocking, fearful shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC this past week. “Mother Emanuel” the church is called because of its long history as a pivotal anchor point of the Civil Rights movement in this country. Peace. Be still. Surely these are the words the victims' family and friends need to hear right now and they need to hear them from everyone they can.

Peace. Be still. We need to let those words seep into our minds and hearts. Let those racing hearts slow down. Let the anger subside. Let the fear loosen its grip. Peace. Be still.

At the risk of stating the obvious, this is not what I expected this Father's Day Sermon to be about. I had thought we would be sharing Dad stories about building a strong foundation for our lives. But I can't not talk about what happened in Charleston. That's because I can't stop thinking about all the bible studies and prayer groups I've led at night in churches – this one and others. I can't stop thinking about how vulnerable we are in churches where we welcome everyone with open arms and without question. I can't stop thinking about how really wonderful those prayer groups and Bible study gatherings are. I always come away energized and restored as I share my faith with other people. We support each other through prayer. We love each other through whatever challenges we bring to pray about together. We deepen each other's faith by sharing our insights and thoughts about the scripture lesson we study together. This is what those people were gathered together to do in the Mother Emanuel church and they were murdered by someone blinded by hate. I also can't stop thinking that what happened in the Mother Emanuel church would most likely never happen here because we are not a black church. I can't stop thinking about what our brothers and sisters at the Pleasant Street Baptist Church in Westerly, a primarily

black church, must be thinking about and praying for this morning. My heart aches for them and for all those faithful people gathering in black churches across this country this morning. What are those pastors preaching about on this Father's Day Sunday? I can't imagine.

But then again, maybe I can. There was a follow-up story to the Mother Emanuel church shooting that you might have missed because it didn't get the same coverage as the horrific shooting itself. It was about what happened when the family members of the victims had the chance to confront the gunman in court when he was arraigned. They were allowed to be there. Do you know what they said, person after person? "I forgive you," they said to him. "I forgive you." Now, I don't know if I could do that in that moment. But those folks did and they did for one reason. They said they refused to give in to the hate which consumed this young man. They knew that unbridled hate is what killed their loved ones and they wanted no part of such powerful hate. They knew that Jesus taught them to respond not from fear or anger, but from the unfathomable love of God. They knew the only possible answer for them, the only conceivable way forward through this unbearable, unbelievable tragedy was to respond not with hate that only begets more hate, not with violence that only begets more violence. They responded with the words Jesus teaches us all in the Lord's Prayer – "forgive us our sins as we forgive those

who sin against us.” Peace. Be still. And the storm ceased and the waters calmed down.

We have a long way to go when it comes to addressing the structural problems of racism and violence in this country. There can be no doubt of that. This incident at Mother Emanuel church has stripped that bare for all to see. But so too is the hope that all things are possible with God. So too is the reality of the power of faith that transcends ugliness and violence and hate.

“Peace! Be still!” Jesus said to the raging storm and it ceased. “Peace! Be still!” Jesus said to the terrified disciples and they calmed down and figured out what they needed to do to reach shore safely. “Peace. Be still!” Jesus says to us when the world is a scary place as it surely has been this past week. “Peace. Be still.” Surely this is the only way we will be able to hear God’s still small voice guiding us forward as we tackle such enormous problems in our society and around the world. Tackle them we must because what happened at Mother Emanuel can never happen again. God expects nothing less of us.

On this Father’s Day and every Father’s Day I think Dads are thinking about what kind of world their children will be living in when they grow up. What happened in Charleston has given us all more reason than ever to think about that question and do one thing more. We need to do the hard work of figuring out what it is God needs us, each one of us, to do so that another shooting like

the one at Mother Emanuel doesn't ever happen again. We need to make the effort to understand the reality of racism in this country and how we can begin to address it. We need to deepen our awareness of violence and its root causes of poverty and lack of opportunity. In short, dear friends, we need to look for where God needs our heads and hearts, our hands and feet, to be a part of making this world into the place we want it to be for our children and grandchildren. They are counting on us! And so is God. That I know.

Peace. Be still. Storms are raging and the seas are rough, of that there is no doubt. The shore is a ways away, but we'll make it if we're willing to do the work it will take to get there. That's what Jesus promised. And he promised to be with us every step of the way, as long as we step out in faith. It's not easy. But nothing truly worth doing ever is. My dad taught me that a long time ago. Maybe your dad taught you the same thing. Happy Father's Day. Amen.