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Living faithfully ... with fear  
Martin Grove United Church  
July 29, 2018  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 14:22-33

Is anyone here a James Bond fan? I really enjoy James Bond films. It's always great to know that there are good people out there to help us every time someone gets the urge to take over the world. And clearly, James Bond must exist in real life, because to date, we have not been taken over. I'm convinced of that anyway. But I've discovered that I start to have a problem with those movies if I watch them too often. I start to notice things. I am forced to see just how unrealistic the movies are.

For one thing, I am faced with the conflict between Bond being an expert in everything while at the same time never seeming to study anything at all. Moreover, Bond's ability to hit his target with every single gun shot - even while shooting over his shoulder with a short-barreled pistol while doing a wheelie on a motorcycle, while the bad guys consistently miss him, even though they are standing on solid ground with long-barreled rifles is more than my imagination can handle - at least some days.

But of course, we are drawn to stories with "silver bullets". Stories and images where somehow, somewhere, some time, some hero will fix everything. Everything will be all right after all. We won't have to make any effort ourselves. And the transformation to a perfect reality won't take long either - the final scenes in Bond movies are always quite short.

And yet, we know that our world doesn't really work that way. One year I was significantly under-employed, and I had to face the cold hard reality that - yes - I no longer had any excuse to not exercise. I had the time. I had the tools. There was nothing but my own lack of interest between me and better fitness. I could no longer say that I was too busy at work. So, I started riding my bicycle all over the place. Reflecting on that experience now I find that I am of three minds. The thinking part of my brain understands that to lose 1 pound of fat I have to burn 3500 calories. The emotional part of my brain understands that if I spent 20 years getting out of shape, it will take more

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than 20 minutes to get back into shape. But the rest of my brain simply cannot understand why getting into shape takes so much time and so much work! That part of my brain just knows that there must be a silver bullet - some shortcut - an easy and simple way to fitness that I just haven't found yet.

I will admit though - I learned a lot by using my bicycle. For one thing, I learned that there are many new words used by cyclists these days. Just walk into Canadian Tire and tell the clerk you are looking for a 10-speed and you'll know what I mean. Not only is a 10-speed now called a "sport bike", but you probably won't find one at your local Canadian Tire anyway. But I am even more mystified that cycling stores no longer sell "water bottles". That's right. No water bottles. And don't imagine that cyclists don't need water anymore, it's just that the thing that holds water is now called a "hydration system". But of course, lots of words have changed over time.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus and Peter walk on water. Did you realize that "walking on water" has been renamed? Absolutely. It's now an extreme sport called "Liquid Mountaineering". Don't laugh. Don't take my word for it.

*[show liquid mountaineering video clip]*

Experts like Sebastian Vanderwerf and Miquel Delfortrie give people tips on how to do it. They give advice on selecting the right shoes, on how to approach the water, and how to use your legs more efficiently to actually walk on water. Did you know - for example - that instead of running straight into the water, you should approach on a gentle curve, which somehow gives you more lift. It's true - apparently. Even the experts admit, however, that the sport is in its infancy. They posted a video explaining all about Liquid Mountaineering to Youtube in April of 2010, and it has been viewed by over 15 million people.

I invite you to check out Liquid Mountaineering on YouTube if you want a closer look. Mind you, all of the footage just shows people running from a field or a beach into a body of water, and then falling down. But 15 million people have chosen to watch the clip we just saw. Of course, the fact that 15 million people have viewed a video does not

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mean that it was not a complete hoax - which of course it was. Sometimes, we just need to give something a new name and it can generate a lot of new interest.

In our gospel reading today, Matthew paints a very interesting story. Once again the disciples find themselves in a boat. Once again the disciples find themselves in fear. But this time, it is the appearance of Jesus that causes much of the fear. The disciples were afraid because they didn't recognize Jesus - who looked like a ghost. Perhaps there was some fog, or at least some mist. In any case, Jesus was in a place that the disciples simply didn't expect to see him. And then Peter - on Jesus's command - walks towards Jesus on the water. In the text, it sounds as if Peter is actually succeeding. But then Peter is distracted by the wind and the waves, which also cause him fear. And so he stops walking on the water and starts sinking into it.

It always intrigues me in this story that Jesus does not start by calming the seas and the wind as the first step towards reducing fear among the disciples. The wind and the waves do not die down until the end of the story, when they are all safely back in the boat anyway. Jesus does not provide a silver bullet in this story. He lets the disciples get along as best they can.

This story always raises a question for me. No - I am not particularly interested in whether or not Jesus and Peter actually walked on water. I am not particularly interested in knowing how much of this story came from the imagination of the author and how much was based on things that Jesus actually did. That may interest you, and that's fine. But for me the key question is this - "Did Peter fail?" Did he fail? Is he a loser because he sank into the water - or is he someone we should admire because he overcame his fear - at least partially - and tried something new - even if in the end he did not succeed. Peter - to his credit - got out of the boat!

One of my favourite hymns in More Voices (138) is "My Love Colours Outside the Lines". For some reason we sing it at Presbytery quite often. I think Peter must have written the chorus himself. The chorus is, "We'll never walk on water if we're not prepared to drown, body and soul need a soaking from time to time. And we'll never move the gravestones if we're not prepared to die, and realize there are worlds outside the lines." Powerful words. "We'll never walk on water if we're not prepared to drown". I

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also love the hymn, “River Running in You and Me” - also in More Voices (163) - which also speak about fear. Because fear is something that we are dancing around in the church - something that we don’t want to name directly.

Throughout the United church, we are living with a high amount of fear and anxiety now. Now only are we restructuring the church - all but one of those remits passed this week at General Council - but there is a good deal of fear simply around survival. As budgets and memberships shrink, it raises questions of how we will survive as a church. Almost all congregations have the same questions: How will we maintain our buildings? How will we maintain our staff? How can we attract other people in our community to join us? And beyond that, I see fear around identity. As Canadian society becomes less Christian - and less religious overall - how are we to be the church today? What does it mean to be a community of faith in our society today? How are we to be faithful to our past while we move into an unknown future - perhaps into an unknown future that we may not really want to embrace?

In truth, there are lots of valid reasons for fear today.

But as in our gospel today, fear is not an enemy that needs to be defeated. Fear is a reality that we have to live through and with. When Jesus came out to the disciples he did not start by eliminating fear. He started with his presence. With action. With encouragement to step out of the boat. With encouragement to step from a known world into an unknown world. Jesus didn’t start by eliminating the disciple’s fear. Jesus didn’t criticize Peter for feeling fear - Jesus simply asked Peter to step out of the boat.

Are we waiting for a silver bullet? Are we waiting for Jesus to calm our seas and our winds? Are we waiting for Jesus to somehow just remove our fear from us? Or are we - like Peter - stepping out, willing to try new things - even if it means that we risk being drowned? We are not unfaithful if we feel fear. We are only unfaithful if we refuse to step out of the boat. That’s great news for mortals like us. We are not required to succeed. Failure is ok. We are only required to try. We can do this!

Failure is actually big business right now. Last summer, the “Museum of Failure” opened in Helsingborg, Sweden. It’s a museum that honours the great value of failure. The value is not in failure itself of course, the value is in learning from failure and then

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trying something else. At the museum, the example failures are all from companies that learned their lessons and then moved on - quickly. Who here even remembers that

*[slide: McSpaghetti]*

McDonalds once sold McSpaghetti?

*[slide: lasagna]*

Who remembers that Colgate once sold lasagne?

*[slide: new coke]*

Who remembers the huge negative reaction to “New Coke”. And yet today, we know all those companies very well. The companies got out of those sinking boats as fast as they could and never looked back.

*[slide: Elon Musk on failure]*

Elon Musk, the creator of both SpaceX and Tesla, said, “Failure is an option here. If things are not failing, you are not innovating enough.” We do not need to fear failure. Remember, if “Plan A” doesn’t work, there are 25 more letters in the alphabet.

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Are you ready to step out? Yes? Then let’s go!

*Amen.*