

WAY MORE COOL THAN A STAND UP PADDLE BOARD

16th in a Series on the Book of Matthew

Passage: Matthew 14

Recently Laurie and I helped Toby, Anna and their girls move into their new home in Orange County. One difficult part of that arduous ordeal was helping Toby mount their new TV on the wall. It was difficult because the thing is approximately the size of an IMAX theater screen. Accomplishing this task required drilling a hole through one wall large enough to pass 6 different cables through, then drilling holes into studs behind the wall board that we could use to screw bolts into to hold the screen on the wall. We carefully measured it all out then hung the TV up on the brackets, and discovered it was a half inch too low. That meant their sound bar would not fit underneath it, and that was the only place the sound bar could go. So we had to try again. We drilled new holes, only to find that one of them somehow had just barely missed the stud. We had to try again, and even though we checked repeatedly, somehow it wasn't quite level! At this point I felt like the project was hopeless. We had drilled enough holes that I was starting to get concerned with the structural integrity of the studs in the wall. Had it been up to me I would have just given up on the project. It seemed hopeless.

Fortunately, Toby is quite different from his dad. He is a lot smarter than me and he has been blessed with a dogged determination that I lack. That almost maniacal persistence is what enabled him to get through medical school when people said it was just not possible for him and rationally it didn't seem it was. I found out where that persistence comes from. Toby insisted we press on. A one-hour project turned into a 4 hour ordeal, but at the end of the evening, that TV was mounted on the wall and working perfectly! The reason Toby persevered was he believed we could do it. I didn't think we could, so I lost hope. Without hope it is almost impossible to keep going. But as long as we have hope, like Toby did, we can keep going.

It is difficult, maybe impossible to keep going when you have no hope. But the great news for us as followers of Jesus is there is never a moment when we have no hope. You have some demanding tasks before you as a follower of Jesus. In fact, they are beyond demanding, they are impossible. Yet there is a way for us to keep going with patience and joy and optimism. We will learn about this in Matthew 14.

JOHN WAS EXECUTED

We last saw John the Baptist in chapter 11 when he was in prison. He had called out Herod for his immorality. Herod's response rather than heed the message and straighten up was to throw John in prison to shut him up. We had seen how John was a bit mystified why Jesus didn't do something about Herod.

In this chapter we see that things never got better for John. At the prompting of Herod's most recent wife and her daughter, Herod chose to have John beheaded rather than look bad before

his dinner guests. So John, who was one of the greatest people ever to live according to Jesus, had his life ended unjustly and all too soon.

JESUS WAS THE EXTREME CATERER

All of us have attended a conference or convention that included a catered meal. Jesus originated this practice, but he did it in a very unusual way. We have record of several meals that he catered. We have never had a meal like the ones he provided. The occasion for this particular catered dinner was a retreat. Only it was a retreat that got out of hand. Jesus wanted to take his inner circle to an isolated area for a bit after he received news of the death of John the Baptist for some down time. They got on a boat and sailed across the lake to a sparsely populated area where they figured they could get away from the crowds. Unfortunately, word about where they were going got out.

Jesus was very popular at that point because his teaching was powerful and it was accompanied by healing all kinds of ailments of people who came to him for help. People couldn't get enough of him, so when they learned where he went they got there ahead of him. When he arrived his little retreat had turned into a huge conference, with thousands of people waiting for him. Verse 21 tells us there were 5000 men there, not counting the women and children. It is likely that there were around 10,000 people there. That is a huge mass of people. What do you do with 10,000 when there was no meeting hall or arena and no public address system? What a nightmare the logistics must have been. But it got worse.

Jesus taught that big crowd and he healed all who were brought to him, but eventually it began to get late. Everyone had been out there all day with nothing to eat. They needed food. If they didn't get it you can be sure not a few would get hangry. The disciples were concerned about this, so in verse 15 they came to Jesus and said, "Uh, Lord, we're out in the middle of nowhere. There's not even a McDonald's within an hour walk of here. These people are getting hungry and there's nothing for them to eat, so why don't we dismiss them so they can go fend for themselves?"

Jesus' response to their suggestion had to have been shocking to the disciples. He said, "They don't need to go anywhere. You feed them." Oh, right. Just feed them. No problem. How were they supposed to do that? A number one combo meal at In-N-Out is \$5.35. So buy one of those for each of the 10,000 people in the crowd and you've got a bill of \$53,500. The disciples didn't have anywhere close to that kind of money. Plus, how do you think it's going to go when you pull up to the drive through window and ask for 10,000 number 1 combos?

I had a friend who faced a nightmare situation once. He was on the staff of a megachurch, that had an all church 4th of July picnic. He had been given the task of providing food for the 2000 people who were coming to the event. He arranged with a fast food restaurant to provide

burgers, fries and sodas for everyone there. The time approached for the meal and there was no sign of the people from the fast food place. He was a bit nervous, but they had guaranteed him they'd be there. The time came for lunch and the people who had agreed to cater were not to be seen. He was in a panic. This was before the advent of cell phones, so he went to find a pay phone and called the place that was supposed to provide the food. They claimed they had no such order and no such record of him ever talking to them. There would be no food! He had 2000 hungry people on hand and no way to feed them. And it was the 4th of July, so a lot of places were closed for the holiday. The disciples were in exactly that situation, except it was 5 times worse. My friend was very resourceful, so he managed to salvage his situation. I don't recall how he did it, but I know it wasn't the way Jesus' disciples did.

We know from other accounts that the disciples went through the crowd searching for food contributions. About 10 years ago Laurie and I were given tickets to the Rose Bowl game, so we took Toby and his college buddy, Andrew, to the game. We also had a parking pass, which we unwisely used. It was unwise because when the game was over it took us more than an hour and a half to get out of that parking area. For almost an hour of it we just sat in our car without being able to move it forward even a few feet. We were just stuck solid. Toby and Andrew were hungry, so they got out of the car and began walking around to various groups that were tailgating asking if they had any extra food. Amazingly, they did get some. Despite the size of the crowd that day when Jesus was preaching and healing, no one was tailgating. Andrew, the disciple, not Toby's buddy, gained a donation of 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish from a boy. Understand these were not loaves the way we picture them. Think of 5 pieces of pita bread. And the fish are likely sardine sized fish. This is where Rubio's got their idea. This kid was having fish tacos. But now that one boy sized fish taco lunch was going to have to provide dinner for 10,000 of his closest friends.

Jesus handed his followers an impossible assignment. They could do their best and it wouldn't even make a dent in the need of the day. It must have been tense when Jesus had the people sit down in groups and it became obvious that he intended to use those fish tacos to feed all of them. Two fish tacos for 10,000 people. So each person would get one 5,000th of a taco. Jesus had done and said a number of things that were pretty strange, but this one was off the charts weird. How was that going to help anything? Trying to do something like that was going to make him look like an idiot.

Except, of course, it didn't. Jesus started sharing that tiny bit of food, and he did it generously. That meant that maybe there was enough for a couple of people to share. Instead there was abundant food for the entire first group of 50 people that he distributed meals to, and then the second, and the third. In the end all 10,000 people had all they wanted to eat, and there was food left over. Jesus told his guys to gather the leftovers and they came up with 12 baskets full

of food. There was one basket for each of them, which even the slowest of them would have understood as a clear and intentional message.

There are those who look for some sort of naturalistic explanation of this event. Matthew wants no part of that. He had seen an astounding miracle. Jesus multiplied food dramatically and supernaturally. And the message was that what he provided was more than sufficient. He was calling those men to a task that was as daunting as feeding that crowd. Just like they did not have the ability and resources on their own to do that, so they did not have the ability to accomplish the task of taking the news of Christ to the whole world and leading the church. But if they would give what they had to Jesus and follow his instruction, he would turn the little, inadequate resources they had into more than enough.

JESUS WAS AN EXTRAORDINARY WALKER

After that event Jesus realized that the quiet retreat wasn't going to happen. He had been popular before, but now he was giving out free food. I suspect that even I could draw a decent crowd if I offered people free fish tacos from Rubio's every Sunday. John 6:15 says after he fed that mob Jesus decided he needed to get away. "Knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, (Jesus) withdrew again to a mountain by himself." I'm not sure how you force someone to be your king, but the point here is they were not taking no for an answer. Jesus could have been the perfect politician. The classic old political motto was "a chicken in every pot," and Jesus actually was able to make it happen. How do you think someone would do running for President if they promised to give people free food so they never had to buy groceries? That's what the crowd thought was coming from Jesus, so they all voted yes on Jesus for Messiah.

The problem was they wanted Jesus as Messiah for the wrong reasons. So Jesus wanted to get away for a bit and let some of the fervor die down. Verse 22 says Jesus told the disciples to get in the boat and cross back over to the other side of the lake. He dismissed the crowd and went off by himself to pray. The disciples headed back, but the trip didn't go that well. They left in the evening. Verse 25 says "Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them." The main events of this incident happened shortly before dawn. That means they had been going all night and had made it "a considerable distance from land," but not all the way across. Verse 24 says the reason for this was that the boat was "buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it."

Many years ago Laurie and I were with our kids on the island of Kauai and we made a memorable kayak trip up the Wailua River. We had been told the best time to make this trip was early in the morning, but we were on vacation and getting up early was not on our agenda. So we made it to the river around 11 or so in the morning and began our journey. We were paddling upstream so it required a lot of work. It was tiring paddling against that current for more than an hour. But we all took comfort in the fact that when we came back down the river we'd be going with the current, so we could basically just float down the river if we wanted to.

So we paddled up to a trail, hiked into the jungle to a cool waterfall and had a great time. Then in the afternoon we headed back down the river and made a discouraging discovery. In the morning the breeze is either still or blows off the land toward the ocean. But around the middle of the day after the land has heated up the wind shifts. It begins blowing from the ocean up the river toward the interior of the island. And as it funnels through that river valley it is fairly stiff. Which meant we were paddling against the wind. That doesn't sound like that big of a deal, but it made a huge difference. We found out we had to paddle just as hard going downriver into the wind as we had going up river against the current. It was disappointing. And very tiring.

Jesus' disciples were going against the wind and making very slow progress. They'd been going all night and they still had quite a way to go. And late that night, or early that morning, not long before sunrise, things began to get really weird. In those low light conditions of very early morning they saw something that was simply not possible. They saw Jesus...*walking* toward them across the surface of the lake.

These days it is not uncommon to be down at the beach, look out at the ocean and see people standing up out on the water! They are standing on stand up paddle boards. Jesus was not the inventor of the very first stand up paddle board in history. He was doing the impossible and walking on the surface of the lake. The disciples weren't thinking, "Hey, look at Jesus! How cool is that?" They weren't asking each other, "How do you suppose he's doing that?" They *freaked out*. Matthew says they were terrified. They cried out in fear, "It's a ghost." Literally the Greek word Matthew used was "phantasm." It's some sort of phantom. But it clearly was not the phantom of the opera. They didn't know what they were seeing, and didn't really believe their own eyes. But Jesus called out, "Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid." In other words, "Chill out, guys, it's me."

This leads to one of the classic moments in Jesus' life. Peter says, "Okay, if it's really you, Lord, then tell me to come out on the water to you." I've puzzled over what exactly Peter was thinking there. There had to be a more obvious way of verifying Jesus' ID. When I forgot my wallet when we went to the airport the TSA took me through a thorough oral exam to verify my idea. Peter should have done that. "Okay, Jesus, what was your mother's maiden name? What was her birthdate?" But instead Peter says, "To prove it's really you tell me to come out there with you." How is that going to help? My best guess is that not long before Jesus had sent his guys out on a short-term mission trip. Before he did he commissioned them and gave them power to miraculously heal people just as he had been doing. So I suspect Peter figured, "Hey, Jesus gave me power to do the cool kinds of miracles he was doing before. This thing he's doing now is really rad. If it's really Jesus, then he should be able to give me the power to do this the way he gave me the power to do those other things."

It really was Jesus, and he could do what Peter asked. So he simply told him, "Come on out, Peter." Peter sometimes gets criticized because he was so full of bluster that he couldn't always back up. We even have an expression for quitting that involves him. If you peter out you give

up, just like Peter did at the crucial moment after boasting he would never fail Jesus. However, incidents like this one show Peter to be a pretty impressive guy. Jesus told him to come, and he got out of that boat and went. It's dark, the wind is howling and whipping up some good sized waves and they are in the middle of the lake. In the midst of that Peter stepped out of that boat. To me, that took amazing courage and faith unless the water was only 2 feet deep, which it wasn't. He had to believe that Jesus could actually enable him to do the impossible, and he had to have the nerve to act on that faith. What if he had been wrong? In rough conditions in the dark there was no guarantee that Peter could survive that experience. In fact, the most likely outcome was that he would drown. We know he could swim, but in those conditions that might not have been enough to save him.

It took a lot of guts, but step out of the boat he did. And for a brief time, Peter walked on water. That made him one of two people in all of history who have managed that feat. However, he didn't manage it for long. When I was in high school we had some friends who loved water skiing and who owned a boat. They decided I needed to learn how to water ski. So on 3 occasions they took me out water skiing. Once was on a river, once was in the ocean, and once was on a lake near Bakersfield. That last time provided me with some empathy for Peter. The day we skied on that lake there were a lot of boats out and lots of people water skiing. By this time I felt quite comfortable with the sport and I popped up quickly and was skiing along well. However, because there were so many boats out on the water it was pretty choppy. I was managing that fine, but at one point we encountered the wakes of a couple of boats that had been going really fast. The wakes were really big. What I needed to do was just relax, let the boat and the skis handle the waves I was encountering. But they were awfully big and there were quite a few of them. Instead of just looking ahead and relaxing, I began thinking, "I don't think I can do this." I focused on the waves and began trying to get myself over them. Down I went, in rather spectacular fashion.

Peter had a similar experience. He was walking on water without skis, and was doing fine. But then he began paying attention to the waves. They were awfully high and they kept coming fast. He began thinking, "I don't think I can do this." He was right. He couldn't. It was never by his ability that he was walking on the water, but he began to think it was. And down he went, in rather spectacular fashion. On the way down, he did the smartest thing he could do. He cried out, "Lord, save me!" And Jesus did. He grabbed him, pulled him out of the water and set him safely back in the boat.

Peter needed to stay focused on Jesus and know that it was by his power that he was walking on the water, not by his own ability. Jesus' power was sufficient to enable Peter to walk on the water, no matter how high the waves might get. When Peter thought it was up to him it was game over.

APPLICATION

DO WHAT GOD TELLS YOU TO DO

In this chapter we see two incidents where Jesus asked his followers to do the impossible. The first impossible task Jesus told them to do was to feed a crowd of thousands of people with a couple of fish tacos. The second was to step out of a boat and walk on the surface of a wind-blown rough lake in the middle of the night. They did not have the ability to do either one of those things. Those guys must have thought, “sheesh, Jesus, ask me to sprout wings and fly or to suddenly grow to be a foot taller than I am, or maybe to stop the sun from rising in the sky. Nobody can do that.”

God does not ask us to walk on water, or miraculously multiply food for masses of people. But God does ask us to do some things that we might find to be nearly as unrealistic as the assignments he gave to those guys. Let me give you a couple of examples. In Ephesians 5:1 Paul wrote, “Follow God’s example.” A more literal translation is “be imitators of God.”

I love comedians who can imitate other people. That’s not as common now as it was a few years back, but I love it when someone can imitate a famous person. For instance, Frank Caliendo does terrific impressions of President Trump, actor Liam Neeson and football coach John Gruden. He has them down perfectly. He sounds just like them and he even has their facial expressions. That’s good, because imitations where you don’t sound like the person you are imitating aren’t funny. They’re just awkward and sad.

Paul calls on us to be imitators of God. He wants us to sound like God when we speak and behave as he does. We are to think like God thinks, speak as God speaks, treat other people the way God would treat them and make important in life what God says is important. That is not an idle comment. It’s not a suggestion. It is a command inspired by God. God is *ordering* us to be like him.

I have a little bit of a problem with that. There is a huge gulf between me and God. Even God says his ways are not my ways. Recently things got zany around our house. Toby and Anna were moving up to their new home in San Clemente, so for several days Laurie and I took care of their 2 kids and their 2 dogs. I’ve mentioned before that one of those dogs, Doc, is sweet and loyal and totally insane. When someone leaves the house, he goes berserk. Toby and Anna were at our house and were about to leave to go do some more packing, but to avoid the total chaos of Doc, they put him in our front bathroom and closed the door. After they left I went to let Doc out only to discover that somehow, Doc had locked the door to the bathroom. Apparently he had been frantically pawing at the door and managed to hit that little lever you turn to lock it. Unfortunately, we couldn’t find the tool that you use to unlock that door. So I said through the door to him, “Doc, you’ve locked the door and we can’t let you out. So could you just unlock the door then I can open it.” He didn’t help at all. He didn’t even make an attempt to unlock the door. He didn’t respond at all. That’s because he has zero idea what I was

saying and what I needed him to do. He was completely unaware of the problem. My ways are not his ways. He cannot behave like I wanted him to, because to do that he would have had to be human, and he doesn't get close. But he is closer to being human than I am at being like God. We have a tendency to give lip service to that command but never seriously try to live by it because we know we can't do it.

In Matthew 5:48 Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." I've never been perfect at anything in my life. I've had people tell me I'm a perfect idiot, but it's not true. Even at my most idiotic I could be more of an idiot than I am. I would love to be perfect, but I know very well I am not and never will be. So God has given me a task to do that I have no chance of doing.

Here's another example. In John 13:34 Jesus ordered us, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." He went on to say that loving the way that Jesus loved is the defining characteristic of his followers. But Jesus loved without limit. He loved unconditionally, to the point that he not only endured unlovable people, he actually cared about them and loved them so deeply that he was willing to die to save them.

I have a friend who is one of the good guys. He is intelligent, gifted, but more important, a terrific person. He cares about people and he has tremendous character. He went into ministry as a pastor. Against the advice of a number of people he accepted a call to lead a church that was loaded with problems. It had mistreated previous pastors, was rife with bickering and division and was declining significantly. But in the course of a couple of years my friend did some amazing things there. He managed to heal the divisions in the church and get the bickering to stop. He got it functioning in a healthy way again and the church began growing. It grew to the point where they needed to hire someone to help him. He hired a promising young guy to help pastor the church. About a year later he began noticing his interactions with the leadership of the church were becoming contentious. He couldn't figure out what was going on, but he did all he could do to resolve the issues. Then one day his leaders informed him that they were firing him. He learned that the new staff guy he had hired had been on a secret campaign to undermine him and get him fired so he could take his job. He had been going behind his back criticizing him and even creating false stories of his failings. Do you know what Jesus orders him to do in regard to that guy? He orders him to love the jerk the way Jesus loves us! That's just not the human way of doing things.

There are going to be numerous times in our lives when God asks us to step out in faith, when he asks us to do something and we are sure there is no way we can do it. Jesus is looking at us in a wind-blown, tumultuous environment of darkness and intimidating waves and saying, "Get out of that boat and do these astounding things I am asking you to do." He seriously expects us to give our best in being like God and loving as he loved and so many other things just as much

as he seriously expected the disciples to feed that massive crowd and Peter to step out of that boat onto the lake.

TRUST THAT GOD GIVES WHAT YOU NEED

The obvious and reasonable response to Jesus' commands in these two incidents was "I can't do it. Why would you ask me that? It is impossible for me to feed those 10,000 people. And in case you haven't noticed, Jesus, walking on the surface of water is possible only if it's an inch deep or I have a paddle board. Without those what you ask of me is utterly impossible. It can't be done."

Yet Jesus asked them to do both of those things, and they were both accomplished. But they were not accomplished by incredible human ingenuity, ability, strength or effort. The disciples had to say, "All right, Jesus, we will do what you say, even though we know we can't" and trust that somehow Jesus knew what he was doing. They had to believe that somehow Jesus could make this thing work, and it did. Their puny effort at providing a banquet for 10,000 people was laughably inadequate, and yet Jesus' power made it more than enough. Peter's attempt to walk on water was briefly successful, but only as long as he trusted Jesus' power and not his own.

Paul felt the pressure of the desire to do the huge job God had given him to do. He was to bring the good news of Jesus to the Gentile world. What a massive job for a former Rabbi. At one point he had some physical problem that he felt was seriously hampering his ability to do the job. But the real problem was not the physical issue at all. It was that he thought it was about his ability. He kept praying that God would take the problem away. Finally, God answered in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." In other words, whether this infirmity makes you less capable is irrelevant. Yes, it may well do that in a purely human perspective. But that doesn't matter. This job is way too big for your capability when you are at your very best. This is about my grace and my power working through you, and that grace is all you need.

Have you ever wondered why God chose Paul to take the good news to Gentiles? Paul would have preferred telling Jews about Jesus. He had encyclopedic knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and of the Jewish faith. He could argue circles around even the smartest Jewish person. And he had a dynamite testimony. By human calculation he was the perfect man to tell the Jewish people and a poor choice for apostle to Gentiles. So God put him in a situation where all of that was almost useless. Why? So Paul and everyone else would know his ministry results were not about his ability. God's grace was sufficient, but Paul's ability was not.

Laurie and I have something that we keep before us to motivate us and to keep us focused on the right things. We remind ourselves that God wants us to live extraordinary lives. My problem is, I'm not extraordinary. I am the definition of ordinary. I am as ordinary as a

tarnished penny. There is nothing exceptional about me. I am not extraordinarily intelligent, strong, fast, talented, creative, or gifted in any way. And yet I believe God wants me, ordinary, plain old, brown paper bag Rick Myatt, to live an extraordinary life. That's because he calls on me, Vanilla Rick, to be like him, and God is the ultimate extraordinary being. There literally is no one like him.

For me to be remarkable like that is to be at peace no matter what my circumstances might be. Imagine this situation. You are a grandparent, taking care of your two grandchildren who have a combined age of less than three years old. In addition, you are taking care of your children's two dogs. One of the kids has desperate need of a diaper change because her diaper has just become a dangerous toxic waste site. But as you are attempting to address that need the other one spills milk all over the place and begins crying. Just at that time some soup you have heating up on the stove boils over and your phone begins ringing. As you go to address just one of those crises the doorbell rings and the dogs start barking wildly. If you can be at peace in that kind of situation, it is more than remarkable. It is extraordinary. God wants us to be at peace not just in situations like that, but in every moment of our lives. He wants us to have peace that is beyond human ability to comprehend. When disaster strikes, the kind of calamity that causes most people to fall apart, to unravel, to become upset or angry at God for allowing it, God wants us to be at peace. He wants us to be calm.

God wants us to be so secure in him that our own insecurity does not ever distort our relationships with people or cause us to fail to love them. God wants us to always treat people with his grace and to continually seek to bless them, to do good for them, no matter how they treat us or how deserving they are. God wants us to continually live for eternal purposes and not be sidetracked by the lures of this world. If we live in this way, it would truly be extraordinary.

These two incidents from Jesus' life were illustrations. They were intended to be real life pictures of the truths that God asks us to do that which we cannot possibly do, but that as we respond and do the little we can do and trust him, he will somehow make it be enough. We need to live by that truth every day of our lives.

The key to living an extraordinary life is the same as the key to feeding that crowd of 10,000 people or stepping out of that boat on a stormy lake. It is rock solid confidence that God is with us. God is as present with you and me as he was with the disciples facing that huge hungry crowd or out on that lake at night, and has all the resources we will ever need to do what he tells us to do. We will never be perfect imitators of God or love people perfectly as Jesus did, but we can get out of the boat. We can trust that what he gives us will be enough, and in that confidence do what he has told us to do.