**Romans 10:5-15**

5Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” 6But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) 7“or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. 11The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.”

12For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. 13For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” 14But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? 15And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

**Matthew 14:22-33**

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land,[\*](javascript:void(0);) for the wind was against them. 25And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. 26But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear. 27But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’

28 Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ 29He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. 30But when he noticed the strong wind,[\*](javascript:void(0);) he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ 31Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’ 32When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’

**What Will Get You Out of the Boat?**

Among the memorable, traumatic experiences of my life was one in the eighth grade. Back then in rural Virginia eighth grade was high school, and in the summer prior to starting eighth grade I decided to try out for the football team, Junior Varsity. Now our varsity football team had the inauspicious reputation for having not won a football game in over three years, which I didn’t know at the time, nor did it seem to matter to me; I just wanted to try out. Practice started several weeks before school started, and I lasted about two weeks of practice before I gave up and decided that football wasn’t for me. Now when school started, I was a bit tense when I learned that my homeroom teacher happened to be the Junior Varsity football coach. Coach Jones, to his credit, did not deride me for “quitting” football. But one day, like a fool, I pushed the envelope. I must say that I prompted Coach Jones’ wrath upon myself when some of my buddies and I were making derogatory remarks about the varsity football team, unaware that Coach Jones had walked into the classroom, and I got an earful or two, and a mouthful or two of humble pie. That’s not my favorite flavor of pie. Looking back at this incident I can say that I’m glad it happened; I learned a lesson about criticizing others for their failures when I myself have never stood in their shoes, when I myself had not tried to help them. It’s a lesson that I think I learned well, thanks mainly to Coach Jones.

And it’s why I don’t come down hard on Peter for his apparent lack of faith in today’s gospel reading. Some people are quick to point out that Peter had to be rescued from drowning in the sea by Jesus, but he was the only disciple to put his faith to the test. Note something else; Peter is careful to obey Jesus. He doesn’t just recklessly put himself in danger; he says to Jesus, “Lord, if it is you, *command* me to come to you.” He waits for the command, as any good disciple would do, and then he obeys. John Wesley translates Jesus’ words to Peter not as “You of little faith,” but “You who have a little faith,” implying that Peter had something that the other disciples did not yet have. Peter deserves to be commended for what he did, which you must admit is more than any of us or any of the other disciples would do.

Today’s gospel lesson provides us with a great illustration of what it means to be Christian. Being a Christian is about following Jesus, and that is much different than being religious. Someone who’s religious can follow the laws and precepts that religion prescribes, and do all this while pursuing other interests, while living in relative safety, but being a Christian is a dangerous endeavor any way you look at it. A Christian *strives* to obey Jesus. It’s not easy, because sometimes he sends you into a squall, and sometimes he’ll tell you to come to him when the only path leading to him is a stormy sea. Sometimes he’ll lead you into a hornet’s nest where your enemies will want to bind you up or hang you from a tree. Being a Christian means casting off from the shore and facing storms, and even walking on billowing seas. That takes more than religious discipline; that takes faith in a living Christ, not in dead letters, which is all that a law really is.

But which path do most of us prefer? I believe that most people prefer religion to discipleship. What I mean is that most people would prefer having a set of laws laid down in front of them and be told, “If you obey these, you will have eternal life.” That’s what religion offers – a “How to” guide for eternal life. If we have the “How to” guide, if we have a list of all the requirements for us to gain the prize of afterlife we could obey those laws and be assured that eternity in heaven is ours. And we would go about doing all that was necessary to assure ourselves of eternity, and spend the rest of our time and energy doing other things. We could spend the required amount of time in church services, observe all required religious holidays and festivals, give the required amount of tithes and alms to the poor, we would say all the proper prayers at the proper times, we would avoid using all the “bad” words, and then we would spend the rest of our time at the beach. Fulfill all the nasty requirements of our religion and enjoy the rest of our time, as if obeying God is some burden we have to endure! If that’s what you think, I have some really bad news for you: you will be spending eternity with the God who makes you do all these boring, unpleasant things. If you don’t like worshiping God on Sunday, how in the world are you going to survive heaven? Heaven would be more like hell for you!

Some may argue that God makes us obey all these laws and perform all these tasks as a sort of test that we must endure in order to receive the reward of heaven, and that heaven is all about doing what **we** want to do. We don’t even need to meet God so long as we pay for our vacation package in full while we’re here on earth. Then when we reach heaven we can just play golf eternally. Which makes me wonder what kind of a God makes people endure boring and unpleasant things as a way of earning the right to do whatever we want for the rest of eternity? Why would God create unpleasant tasks and force us to do them? What’s the point?

God did not create us in order for us to suffer doing things that bring us no joy, at least not the God that I worship and glorify. The God that I worship is the God who wants my life to be filled with joy forever, and that is a God who I long to spend eternity with. I’m not interested in simply occupying a room in his mansion, a room close to the golf course and the sushi bar. I want to spend my eternity with God, and the wonderful news is that I already am! I don’t have to wait to spend time with God, because God is present here and now. He is a living God, not a bunch of dead letters.

You see, we serve a living God, the Risen Christ, who reigns in us if we invite him to do so. That’s a lot different from obeying a set of rules, from fulfilling a minimum set of requirements; Serving a living God means submitting ourselves completely to Christ, giving him *all* your time, *all* your resources, *all* your heart. We call him a living God because he is active in our lives, guiding us through an ever-changing world. And in our surrender to Christ, we find our joy. Our happiness no longer comes from all the non-religious stuff that we do; our joy is in the Lord, because unless our joy is in the Lord, we can’t possibly expect to find any joy in heaven. Heaven would seem like hell to us. If we find no joy in obeying God’s laws we will certainly find no joy from dwelling in his presence.

But we do find joy in God’s presence because living in Christ means that we are dwelling in his love, and dwelling in love is where we find perfect joy. Dwelling in love means we are free. We are freed from sin, we’re freed from death and we’re freed from religion. Worship is no longer drudgery; it’s invigorating! Giving to the poor is not a mandate; it’s what you desire to do, and it brings you immeasurable joy because you have something to give! Serving others becomes an opportunity rather than an obligation.

And dwelling in God’s love means that you’re not afraid to try things that seem impossible to others. Following Jesus means inviting ten thousand guests to lunch when all you have is a few fishes and loaves, and not being embarrassed for having so little but being thankful for what you have. Following Jesus means riding boats on stormy seas, even walking on those stormy seas. And there will be times when the wind and the waves cause you to tremble in fear, but following Jesus also means trusting that he’ll always be close enough to reach you, to take your hand and lift you out of the abyss. Following Jesus means that you don’t just wait for him to command you; you ask him to command you.

Dwelling in God’s love prompts us to get out of the boat and start walking toward Jesus despite the wind and the waves. So let us exercise our little faith. Let us walk on water as the Lord commands us. May our motives be as pure and simple as wanting to be close to Jesus. Amen.