

Faces of Failure: The Disciples

Mark 4:35-41

When my siblings and I were teenagers, my mom was worried about the people we hung out with. She would remind us to choose wisely. “Bad company destroys good morals,” she would say. Or “You’re defined by the company you keep.” Or my favorite: “If you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas.” Like most parents, Mom wanted to protect us from those that might get us into trouble.

In that light, I wonder if anyone ever warned the disciples about hanging around with Jesus. I know that is almost heretical to ask, but if you read the New Testament, you find that Jesus is always getting his friends into trouble. In Matthew’s Gospel, for example, they get in trouble with religious leaders for eating with sinners, breaking the Sabbath rules, and failing to wash their hands before dinner. And, of course, they end up fleeing from religious and political authorities in the garden when Jesus is arrested, lying about knowing him, and hiding out after he’s crucified. In the Book of Acts, Jesus’ friends are arrested, jailed, forced to flee, and even martyred. In short following Jesus is not all sunshine and rainbows but wind and waves, as we see in today’s reading.

Jesus had been teaching people on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee when the crowd grew so large he commandeered a fishing boat—a vessel about 26 feet long and eight feet wide—in which he could sit. From there he spent the day teaching those on the shore about the kingdom of God. He did so through parables, stories that compare very common items or situations to God’s realm.

One might figure that when evening came Jesus would dismiss the crowd, have the disciples row ashore, and go home. But instead, he decides they will cross to the east side of the Sea of Galilee. For experienced fisherman like Peter, Andrew, James and John that eight-mile trip would be no big deal, even at night, but the Sea of Galilee can be tricky. The waters, which are generally calm, begin to pummel their vessel. Before long, their boat is taking on water and in danger of capsizing. Their lives are in danger of being swept away as they desperately clutch the rudder or frantically bail the water. They are terrified.

They would have been content to go home that night and sleep in their own beds. They didn’t need to cross the Sea of Galilee. The eastern shore was Gentile territory anyway. They didn’t want to go there. But Jesus decided they would, and because he did, they were in the dark of night, fighting for their lives against the overwhelming forces of nature.

And what makes it worse is that Jesus isn’t helping. While they are struggling to survive, Jesus is curled up on the raised stern, his head on the pilot’s cushion, sleeping like a baby. No wonder the disciples awaken him. “Teacher,” they say, “do you not care that we are perishing?” They are not just cold, wet and terrified, they’re mad. Jesus has gotten them into trouble, and he doesn’t seem to care what happens to them.

Being a disciple of Jesus can be like that. There are preachers and ministries that suggest that following Jesus is the key to health and wealth. They tell people that when you confess Jesus as Lord life becomes smooth sailing. Often when we get into the boat with Jesus we sail into trouble.

When you get home Google Eric Liddell, who refused to run on a Sunday in the 1924 Olympics because of his faith. Or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose allegiance to Jesus would not allow him to bow down to Hitler's Nazism. Following Jesus got them into trouble.

Or imagine the tempest likely to follow when you tell your 10-year-old's soccer coach that Worship is more important than the tournament he wants the team to enter.

Following Jesus often means trouble. And if you are in the middle of that storm, if you're frightened, if you aren't sure you will survive, then it's not too hard to imagine thinking, "Jesus, do you not care that I am being ridiculed, imprisoned, fired? Am I to be cast out of my family, benched, or demoted for all you care?"

Yet it is in those times of trouble failing appears. It is a failure to trust. Specifically, it is a failure to believe that the one who leads us into the storm is the one who can lead us through it.

When the disciples went to Jesus with their accusation, his response was simple. Our reading says he "awoke," but the word used means to "rise up" or "to extend to one's full height." So, Jesus stands up nice and tall, and then "rebukes the wind and says to the sea, 'Peace! Be still.'"

The language is telling because it recognizes the sea as the abode of chaos. Mark says Jesus' "rebukes" the wind and the sea.

And, of course, the wind and sea obey. The wind "ceased, and "a great calm" came upon the sea. In fact, so dramatic is the change that the frightened disciples are stunned. "They were greatly awed." And they begin to ask one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?"

Because they knew only God reigns over the wind and waves.

The disciples were beginning to realize that Jesus was more than they had once thought. They were beginning to realize that he possessed the power of God. They were beginning to see that the one who had gotten them into trouble was the one with the power to get them through it.

And that would be important because there were storms still to come. They themselves would be harassed, jailed, stoned, and martyred. And yet when those winds and waves buffeted them, they possessed the memory of Jesus doing what only God could do, and they could trust that he would see them through. So can we.

When the storms come, remember the disciples that day on the Sea of Galilee. Remember how they moved from alarm at the power of the wind and the waves to awe at the power of Jesus. Remember how they moved from the failure of doubt to the security of trust. And join them. Stop looking out and look up. Turn your eyes away from the troubles and to Christ. Trust that the one who leads you into life's storms will be the one to lead you through them.