

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 9, 2026

Text: Matthew 14:22-33 (Gospel)

Other Texts: Job 38:4-18 (Old Testament Reading); Romans 10:5-17 (Epistle)

“Fear or Faith in Christ”

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

When thinking of Peter walking on the water, two things stand out, his *faith* and his *fear*. While it is true that his faith faltered, we have to admit that it took tremendous trust in Jesus to step out onto that water in the first place. You might have noticed that none of the other eleven were volunteering to do so, and I’m not sure many of us would have either. At the same time, Jesus said he had little faith, for his faith did falter, fear took over, and he began sinking rapidly. This morning, let’s take the time to compare and contrast fear and faith in Christ.

Unbelief can show itself in many ways, such as hypocrisy, open sin, anger at God, or spiritual laziness. But a major manifestation of unbelief is *fear*. Why is fear a manifestation of unbelief? Fear rises when we put our focus on the problems we face, whereas faith puts the focus on Jesus who can deliver from any and all problems. Just consider Peter.

While he focused on Jesus in faith, he walked on the water. But once he looked away from Jesus, he began dwelling on the waves piling up around him. Now, the waves were still there while Peter focused on Jesus, but he was fine because he was looking at Jesus in faith, trusting in Jesus to protect him. But when the waves became his focus he noticed how big they were, how dangerous they were, how deadly they were to somebody stupidly standing out in the middle of the sea which is impossible anyway.¹ And so, his focus shifted to the problems of his current circumstances and faith in Jesus was quickly replaced by fear, leading to near tragedy.

See then how fear is a form of unbelief. It is a failure to trust in Jesus for help and deliverance. Fear doubts Jesus. It doubts His power. It doubts His love. And as the fear builds up, our doubts about Jesus keep building too. Fear replaces faith in Jesus. It causes our prayers to falter. It leads to the Christian virtue of patience during suffering being thrown out the window. And our impatience with Jesus’ perceived inaction leads us to start taking things into our own hands. But what really happens is we become like Peter. We look away from Jesus and focus on the problems we face, and we only become more overwhelmed by the challenges we face.

Faith is very different than fear. As we said earlier, faith doesn’t ignore the waves of life; it just doesn’t get overwhelmed by them. It doesn’t get overwhelmed by them because, putting it in the simplest terms possible, faith recognizes that as big as they are, Jesus is bigger still.

Fear doubts Jesus’ power to help in times of need. But faith is based upon God’s holy Word, and the Word shows the power of Jesus. During His earthly ministry, Jesus’ miracles were little glimpses into the hidden reality of His godhood. And today’s Gospel is one of those glimpses as Jesus’ rule and power over the natural world is revealed. The wind did not buffet Him. The

¹ That is, without the miraculous help of Jesus.

waves did not splash Him. He did not sink as He walked across the water. As He enters the boat, the storm immediately ends, leaving only calm in its place.

But this should not surprise us, for Jesus is no mere partial god, some Johnny-come-lately who first existed about 2,000 years ago. He is the Eternal Son of the Father through whom all things were made.² He is the God who challenged Job, asking him if he was there when He created the earth and the seas, giving each their place in the first six days of created time. *That* is the Jesus who was walking on the water and who stopped the storm, the Jesus who is very God of very God, who rides the clouds as His chariot.³ As the omnipotent God in human flesh,⁴ Jesus has the power to help us in our times of need.

But having the power to save is not the same thing as having the willingness to save. So fear also doubts Jesus' love; it doubts His *desire* to help us when we need Him, wondering why if He loved us so much that He would let us suffer the way we do. But again, we can put our fears to rest because our faith in Jesus is based upon God's Word.

In the Gospel reading we see Jesus' love. Yes, He may have let the disciples be battered in the storm a bit, but *only* so that He could come to them in their time of need, deliver them, and thereby encourage their faith in Him. He reaches out and grabs hold of the sinking Peter. He brings the storm to a sudden end for His exhausted disciples. Yet, these are but hints of His great love.

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus said to His disciples, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."⁵ Jesus proved His great love for each one of us here when He went to Golgotha, the place of the Skull,⁶ and laid down His life on the cross. With that act He proved that He had the greatest love possible as He died for us. *That* is the love of Jesus' that our fear would lead us to doubt. Jesus, *true God*, hanging on a cross, *dying* on a cross, so that we could be forgiven and live now and forever. Such a sacrifice proves Jesus' love for us. And if He loved us enough to die for us, He certainly will help us for whom He died.

So do we have faith or are we filled with fear? How often we are like Peter! One moment, our faith in Christ is strong. We regularly receive His faith empowering gifts of Word and Sacrament. We see our need for help and we call on Him, our prayers being strong. *Not* strong in that we can do it on our own, but strong in that we are asking for *His* help according to *His* will, trusting fully that He will deliver us, bring us through, in whatever way is *best for us*.

We recognize that the troubles we're facing are being used by Him to strengthen our faith and, while not enjoying them, we even rejoice confident that He is using them for our good. It is at those times that we face seemingly insurmountable challenges head on, because our faith is focused on Jesus, just like when Peter was walking on the water. But we're not like that all the time are we?

² John 1:3

³ Cf. Psalm 104:3.

⁴ Colossians 2:9

⁵ John 15:13; All quotes are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

⁶ John 19:17

Too often our fears get the better of us, overwhelm us. We focus on the problems and they look so big; and we cringe before them. We begin to doubt Christ's power and love at those times, and so we increasingly look to ourselves to overcome things. But as we move further away from faith we keep sinking deeper and deeper into our fears, cares and concerns, and so we are sinking deeper into unbelief.

But take heart. Instead of letting Peter drown due to his fear and lack of faith, Jesus saves him. Was He disappointed with Peter? Clearly, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"⁷ But letting him sink for a moment was an act of discipline, and the rebuke was a correction made in love, all to encourage Peter fear less and to trust in Him all the more. And it worked, for this is the same Peter who died a martyr's death for His Lord Jesus.

We recognize that we too are the recipients of that same rebuke, "O you of little faith." But we recognize that it is a loving correction to us as well. Jesus encourages us to trust in Him all the more, reminding us that He is never far off. When we are in need and cry out to Him for help, He is right there, reaching out and grabbing us with His hand. His almighty hand that created all things. His loving hand that still has the nail marks from the cross in it to remind us of His eternal love for us.

We will face the challenges of this life. In fact, as Christians, we will likely face even more. But with His hand, Jesus grabs us and we are saved from sin, death, the devil, and all other things as well. Build your faith on that truth about Jesus, your Savior, and you need never fear.

The love of the crucified and risen Jesus drive out all your fear and keep your faith focused on Him alone until life everlasting. Amen!

⁷ Matthew 14:31.