

*A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 10, 2008, dedicated to the William A. Platt Family, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Reach Out and Grab Hold”**

**Genesis 37, 1-4, 12-28; Matthew 14,  
22-33**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Our texts today give us two great stories of two great men – Joseph, Jacob’s son, and Jesus, Joseph’s son. Each is chosen by God at a pivotal point in their people’s history to save their nation. Each is favored by a father and jealously judged by brothers and other men. One grows to greatness out of the strife in the family of his father – a great patriarch of Canaan. One grows out the strife and conflict in the Roman Empire and Jewish community of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. One is the interpreter of dreams. The other is the fulfillment of dreams. Each is a central part of the epic story of Jewish and Christian scriptures.

In Genesis 37:1 begins a story that will ultimately end the book of Genesis, 13 chapters later. Joseph's story is so rich in color and imagery that it remains one of the most vivid in the Hebrew scriptures.

“The theology of the passage is hidden in that there are no moral conclusions placed before us. In fact, God is not even named in the passage. But those who read this story to the end, will be impressed that things would have turned out much differently for Joseph (and for Israel) had it not been for the watchful care of the One who brought Israel into being.” (Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching*, p. 434).

This narrative introduces us to Joseph and his half-brothers, who had a different mother. It is clear that Jacob favors Rachel, and her son, Joseph. Through this favoritism, we are also introduced to Harem intrigue – a common fact of life in ancient Near East life – as jealousy is passed on from mothers (less favored) to sons (also less favored). Protected by Dad, because of his youth and his favored status, the dream interpreter with the “coat of many colors” is drawn out of the tent and into the desert by his half-brothers.

Away from the shelter of his father's delight, Joseph is thrown into a waterless pit by his 10 half-brothers (Benjamin appears to be either very young or not yet born). The intention is to kill Joseph, but thanks to Reuben's intervention, Joseph's life is spared because most certainly death awaited him in the desert pit. He is sold to Ishamaelites (remember the other son of Abraham – here is his progeny saving Issac's progeny – quite ironic) and carried off to Egypt as a slave.

There is another delicious irony in this for the readers because we discover that by sparing Joseph's life, Jacob and the families of his eleven sons are ultimately spared later in Genesis by Joseph when the slave becomes a powerful leader of Egypt. But, this is not today's story.

I can see Joseph reaching up from the pit of despair and grasping the hand of his Ishmaelite brother who pulls him to the safety of slavery from the dangers of death in the pit. Given a second chance, Joseph, under the guidance of God, will save Egypt AND Israel! **Out of the pit and onto the water!**

Thousands of years later and hundreds of miles away on the largest body of fresh water in the land of Israel, another storm is brewing. Matthew's Gospel takes us to the stormy Sea of Galilee. There, "The son of God" walks on water, invites Peter to join him in water-walking, catches Peter as he sinks into the water, teaches of trust and true faith and calms the sea.

Amid the pressures of ministry, the story begins with Jesus needing time away from the crowds and the disciples to pray. While the disciples go out in the boat (they are mostly fishermen!), Jesus goes up on the mountain.

During the night, he is alone in prayer and they end up fighting for their lives in a storm on the sea of Galilee. As the morning dawns, Jesus walks across the water to the boat – the disciples, needless to say, are a bit freaked out. He offers them reassurance that it is he, Jesus, not a ghost, who is coming to them.

He tells them to have no fear. Peter steps up and says, “**Since it is you**, command me to walk on the water with you!” Peter knows that whatever Jesus commands, Jesus makes possible. Jesus bids Peter, “Come.” Out jumps Peter onto the water! Peter seems fine on his first step across the water, but the wind blows up and he goes down, crying for Jesus to save him. Pulling his #1 disciple out of the waves, Jesus proclaims, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” It is at this point, we pause to reflect on the meaning of the judging word of Jesus. I love Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s classic analysis of Peter’s response found in *The Cost of Discipleship* (pp. 53-60). Bonhoeffer wrote:

*Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he never would learned the meaning of faith . . . The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if people imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics.*

Bonhoeffer goes on to draw the theological paradox that emerges from this scene: “*Only the one who believes is obedient, and only the one who is obedient believes.*”

In other words, had Peter stayed in the boat and not taken the first step, his faith would have been worthless. It is by stepping out of the boat that Peter’s faith is tried and true. When the wind picks up and Peter drops down, we need to remember that this is not a story of a skeptic who habitually doubts, but a faithful follower who becomes overwhelmed by the circumstances surrounding him and begins to lose his

nerve when the odds are stacked against him, trusting at that point in his Savior to save him. The steady, delivering hand of Jesus pulls Peter out of the water as Peter reaches out and grabs hold.

Within this hour, we, as members of First Church, will gather on the sea of decision making. We call it a special congregational meeting. I believe it is “special” because we feel the moment is at hand to decide whether or not we should jump in and take a chance as a congregation to purchase the land on the corner of Broad and Cleveland known as 414 E. Broad St. – belonging to the William A. Platt family – or walk away from this opportunity to control the land to our west.

As your theologian in residence, as you raise your hand today, I would remind you of the two men who have raised their hands already – one Joseph, the other Peter. Sinking in a pit of death, Joseph reached up for a second chance. Sinking in a sea of despair, Peter reached out and took hold of his savior’s hand.

I again remind you of Bonhoeffer’s words, now read with the lenses of our decision making which stands before us.

*If Peter had not taken the risk, he never would have learned the meaning of faith . . . The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if people imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics.*

Let us not be deluded. Let us be faithful. Let us step

out. Let us step forward. And if we fall, let us reach out and grasp the hand of Jesus. Let us not be afraid. Rather, let us faithful and obedient to Christ. Amen.

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