

June 17, 2018

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 4:35-41; Habakkuk 1:1-2:4

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*Clarity through Caring Dispute*

Hello Jesus! Wake up! Can't you see what's going on here? Don't you care?

Wind tosses the boat. Waves splash over the sides. Water swirls around their ankles.

Simon, Andrew, James and John make their living fishing those waters.

It's their life. They know about sudden storms on the Sea of Galilee. They know how to get in to shore and shelter fast in familiar waters they ply. If they're concerned, imagine the panic landlubbers must feel. Now they're crossing over toward unfamiliar Gentile territory; the other side of the sea where they've rarely been. They're doing what Jesus told them. They trust his direction. They follow his lead. And now when all chaos breaks out, he's curled up on a cushion, like a cat lounging in the sun. Really? He's undisturbed by the roaring gusts and roiling sea?

I wonder what the disciples expect of him. Maybe at least to take his turn at the oars, to pull his weight like the rest of them, to help ride out the storm. If they'd read a little Harry Potter, they might expect him to magically expand their little fishing boat into a yacht! Or levitate through wind, above the waves ... escape!

In that same boat, grounded in calm shallows off-shore, he'd just expanded the vision and raised the spirits of crowds gathered on a beach. He'd taught parables of sowing grain, growing in faith like mustard seeds, not hiding our lamp under a bushel basket. That's good. That's true. Inspiring sentiments about how God works.

Right now, they're thinking: we could use real salvation. Literally, practically, from the impending danger of drowning. And Jesus seems unaware. They cry out, "Do you not care?"

That's what early Christians asked as they crossed over in their growing church from Jewish roots to include Gentile converts. As their faithfulness got buffeted by storms of persecution in society, contention with other church friends, and whatever fears and anxieties rolled through their personal lives. You see, as much as a stormy sea outside, this story gets at turbulence they feel inside. Who to trust when the way gets rough, when tempests blow through life suddenly and chaos tosses us like a canoe in a hurricane. Hey Jesus! Don't you care? Yes, I wonder what the disciples expected of him. Certainly not that he could change the very nature of the storm itself. For when he does they ask astonished: who is this, who even the wind and waves obey?

Mark's hearers would have recognized the word for "storm" used here is the same as the whirlwind of chaos in Job. And so is the basic question, and so is the promise. Just as God exerts power over the chaos at creation, so in Christ, Holy Love transforms chaotic conditions that blow through our lives. "Peace!" Jesus says, "Be still!" As winds cease, he draws them from fear into faith.

Friends, isn't that the move we're always longing to make? From fear to being right with God in faith. I can't promise exactly what that will be in your life. As I read these texts and listen to you, here's one central bit of good news I hear. Precisely as the disciples challenge Jesus and cry out to him, he responds and they are raised from despair about near-death to new life, to new possibilities for ministry as they reach the other side. Through our caring disputes arises clarity about our way of faith from here. The way of peace in our hearts and purpose, in our words and hands, gets revealed through caring dispute with God, and with other people.

Hello Jesus! Wake up! Can't you see what's going on here? Don't you care? I wonder what makes that cry echo within us and among us today. What swells and troughs in our personal lives—medical news, job stress, unexpected expenses, loss. What gale winds blow through relationships with friends, colleagues, family, even those most dear to us. What churning seas of society buffet our little life boat, threatening to swamp and drown us, as we bail the waters of change, fear, anger, anxiety swirling around our ankles. Boaters with any experience know that perfect sunny days can turn rapidly into dark stormy skies.

This week I think of our national Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly that began yesterday in St. Louis. You know, there's a rook of crows, a parliament of owls ... and surely, lots of jokes about what it is when Presbyterians gather! From all around our nation and world our General Assembly continues the great lineage of faithfulness inherited from the psalmist, and Saints Julian, Benedict, Catherine and more. The fact it's in St. Louis is itself something to note. You know, these conference venues get lined up years ahead. When storms struck Ferguson and surrounding St. Louis following Michael Brown's shooting death, some questioned if our assembly should move. We decided to stay the course, at least to provide some witness as we could to God's vision for the order of grace and peace in society. Maybe a little clarity, through care, during a dispute.

Of course, whatever breezes or gales swirl through that community, contentious gusts will blow through committee rooms and a great convention hall, as well. From earliest Christians through all generations, a boat on the sea has been a metaphor for the church. Like Noah's ark. Like those fishing disciples. Like St. Paul crossing the Mediterranean on his missionary journeys through the Roman world.

In fact, at one of the General Assemblies where I served, the Stated Clerk used this very text to inspire a vision for the church. Whatever the major controversy or uncertainty that year he tried to encourage how we'll get to other side together. This year, friends, there are wave upon wave of overtures about societal concerns: opioid addiction, gun violence, various forms of prejudice, Korea, Syria, Israel / Palestine, collaboration with other churches, streamlining our church operation, and so much more, including a vision for our church in coming years. In and beyond inspiring sentiments, we need real, practical salvation.

We've included that draft vision in our bulletin. While planning this service weeks ago, I thought about exploring the vision in more detail. God calls us to be prayerful, courageous, united, serving, and alive. We can read more explanation under each point. Now, as we might know, Presbyterian process is not a rigid formula of action—you know, like those fourth grade input / output box math problems we learned. Presbyterians have fun in committees! I'd be surprised if the final version put out is the same as the draft that went in! Openness to what happens inside that "box," in those relationships, far more than a set equation is more the point that comes to me today. At GA, in our church, in our lives and relationships in so many ways how do we even clarify a shared vision and put it into action? Amid so many different perspectives and experiences how do we catch God's vision and dream God's dream?

Habakkuk's lists of offenses and concerns could have been General Assembly overtures. Hello Lord! Can't you see what's going on here? How long shall we cry, and you don't seem to care?! Behind each complaint must have been real people like you and me Habakkuk knew intimately. What is the world coming to? Where does this all lead? Where is God amidst it all? His prophetic thunder serves as prayer for the healing of society.

And like Jesus waking up in the boat, God responds. God does care as much as Habakkuk. Write the vision and make it plain ... so that it will catch the attention and be read by people running by; or maybe so that people who read it will be filled with passion run share it with others. Hebrew grammar isn't totally clear. Sometimes I wonder if that's intentional. Maybe clarity in the end comes through both what we see and read, and how we speak and act.

And so, friends, we stand at our posted stations of life—at home and work and all around our community, waiting to glimpse God's vision of grace, watching for how God will guide us. With complete faithfulness, we place our whole life in the Holy Hands of Love. We keep hope, trust, confidence, and persistence that Sacred Purpose for our life together and all creation will come to pass.

And here's the gospel word for us. Again, Habakkuk receives God's answer when he challenges and laments and cries out. He doesn't sit in silence, expecting bliss like some magic charm. Habakkuk loves God. For him, dispute is part of loving relationship. And so as we fulfill the Great Commandment entwining love for God and love for neighbors, we do the same. We engage with others in caring dispute. Through our questions, our struggles, our insights Jesus gets revealed. Amid our storms and stress, God's presence in Christ awakens among us. The grace and love of Christ fills our minds and hearts. We hear a voice of peace, stillness, confidence and gain clarity—a vision for God's purposes among us.

In Mark and Habakkuk divine clarity comes through caring and dispute combined. And friends, let's be clear. Sometimes we have one but not the other. We have a lot of care, but we avoid any conflict. So real issues don't get addressed. Problems persist. Feelings may fester, grow more bitter, swirling ever faster inside. Until one day a cyclone erupts on what seemed like otherwise placid seas. One might wonder if such care without courage for dispute betrays a lack of trust, unity, authenticity.

Or we might know well conflict with little care. I wonder how you picture it in a personal relationship, or in our culture. Last night, I talked with our daughter Ailih who's a Young Adult Advisory Delegate at General Assembly right now. She's on the Middle East Peacemaking committee. I've been pretty invested in those concerns over many years. We talked through ambivalence seeing goodness in differing perspectives and positions. Whichever way people lean, I said, it does no good when to demonize the "other side."

She called when we were at Liz Dell and Andy Hamilton's wedding reception. Friends, truth is, caring disputes are a real part of even our most beloved bonds of life and love, at best. That's how we come to see, to envision what's right for us in God's grace as we grow to understand more clearly and accept one another more fully. And on this Father's Day, amid much desire for affection and cherishing of fond memories, maybe we might also feel appreciation for some clarity and inspiration received, in God's grace, when we didn't always agree.

Here are a few more glimpses from conversations with others this week—how we gain clarity about Holy Vision through caring dispute.

At a gathering of local Presbyterian clergy, we discussed some current issue about the church or culture. And Dave McShane observed: Our western society struggles with "we." He heard a speaker or read an author, who had trouble using a plural pronoun. But, he said, most other cultures in the world see how we are inherently related and inextricably connected with all people and all things. At the heart of our faith, we're not a bunch of little individual Jesus-es running around. Together we are the body of Christ. That's true. That's something I can trust. God doesn't call us to be individual Jesus-es. God forms us together as the presence and power of the risen Christ for real salvation. Yes, Chrissy agreed with Dave: Collaboration guides our

direction. In our church, the only thing decided by one person is what gets preached in worship. Everything else is a shared decision, by us as the body of Christ. That's why I'm Presbyterian, she said! And friends, even sermons at their best are really ongoing conversations we share throughout the week.

I had lunch with another member among us on Wednesday. We shared more about our lives than we'd known before. We discussed observations, questions, possibilities about our church budget deficit needs this year. I told him I love him and I'm grateful he's willing to speak up even when it seems others don't agree. Somehow that got us on to wider society. And he stressed: one major problem is that increasingly we see people as objects not humans. Yes, I agreed, too often, niche marketing and polarizing positions seem to reduce people and relationships to an isolated narrow definition of life. Real people like you and me are far more nuanced, complicated, and blessed with goodness beyond what we buy or do for pleasure, where we work or were educated, how much money we make or how we vote, or however else we might be targeted through social media and advertising.

So, friends, you'll call me wanting to dispute with a public official. A public official who quoted an isolated sentence of the Bible out of context with the true wider vision God has for us (as written explicitly just a few verses later) – giving our hearts to the Sacred Spirit among us by loving our neighbors in that same Spirit.

We'll talk about fractures in our families ... some that remain for decades.

We'll struggle with how to seek what's right amid what seems wrong at work, or in our city, or here in our church.

We'll dispute with ourselves, our aging bodies, our slipping memories, our faults and imperfections and guilt.

In so many ways of our personal lives and church and community, friends, we're ever crossing over into unfamiliar territory. We've never been there / done that. Storms will blow. We will be like those in peril on the sea. I pray that through it all we may care enough to cry out like the disciples and Habakkuk, to bring our laments like overtures before our General Assembly. Care enough as we keep bailing and rowing and standing at our watch post. Care enough to keep looking and listening for a vision of grace to be revealed—a way of compassion, truth about the power of love above all, a life of service to others more than selfish pursuits. I am the Way, I am Truth, I am Life for you, Jesus promises. Trust that Jesus is not undisturbed, immune to our concern. Yes, God cares for us. God draws us ever more from fear into faith. Far better than just riding out storms, the Holy One of Love changes the very nature of the storms themselves.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

You can follow updates from the GA 223 at this link: <https://ga-pcusa.org/>

And a report on our church's Vision 2020 can be found here:

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/final-day-pcusa-2020-vision-team-meeting-address-reports-final-form/>