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Remember Jesus Christ!

Matthew 14:22-36; II Timothy 2:8; Hebrews 12:1-2

A curious feature of Scripture is that we know almost nothing about the authors of its sixty-six books. Since Moses' death is recorded in Deuteronomy 34, he did not write the Pentateuch, the Bible's first five books. The Pentateuch probably takes shape over several centuries as Israel writes down her oral traditions. We think the Gospel of Mark is written by John Mark, recording the memories of Peter, but we're not sure. We think that John, the beloved disciple, writes the Gospel of John, but since it is written about 90 A.D. is John still alive? So we're not positive who wrote John's Gospel.

But it doesn't matter who writes Scripture because its subject is not the authors, but the Triune God, our loving Heavenly Father, Jesus, our Lord and Savior, and the empowering Holy Spirit, who energizes us for mission.

I point this out today because it is said when a minister retires, "Many people are sad; a few people are glad, but most people didn't know you were there." Indeed, almost every Sunday I preach, one of you shakes Chuck's hand and says, "I enjoyed your sermon." And when Chuck preaches, one of you tells me the same thing. Several years ago, at a meeting, we start with introductions. At Chuck's turn, he says, "I'm Rick Snyder," so at my turn, I say, "I'm Chuck Carlson." Not one person noticed! But actually that is good theology. Because our pastoral role is to point you to Jesus, who alone is Head of the Church.

Ministry is both a great joy and a weighty burden. What a joy it is: to hear a bride and groom, promise, with God's help, "*I will love you in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, in good times and in bad,*" to baptize a newborn, trusting that God is already at work in her life, or to see young prostitutes in Malawi sing with a radiant and holy joy, because they have met Jesus and know they are loved with an unshakable love!

Funny things happen in ministry. When I receive my call to Freeport in Northern Illinois, the newspaper article heralding my arrival begins, "Rick Snyder, who is single, has been called as Assistant Pastor of First Presbyterian Church."

In Freeport I perform my first baptism, never before having held a baby. So when the mother hands him to me, I grab him for dear life . . . with both hands. Then I realize. I don't have a hand free to reach for the water. So awkwardly I return him to his mother and confess, "I need practice holding babies." And I kid you not,

that week two grandmothers call me and say, “Our granddaughter is going to be home next week. Can you come for dinner?”

In McHenry on a blisteringly hot summer day, just as I ask a couple, “Are you ready to make your vows to one another?” the fire alarm erupts. CLANG! CLANG! CLANG! Thankfully the couple is still married. Then there is the groom who is so anxious that he puts his ring on his bride’s finger. Still confused, he says, “It’s too big,” to which his bride says, “Honey, I get the sparkly one.”

Things happen in ministry that they don’t cover in seminary. Shortly after arriving in McHenry, the treasurer calls, “Ah, Rick, we’ve only got \$16.41 in the checking account.” Naively I ask, “Can you transfer money from another account. Long silence. She, then, says, “I’m not sure you understand.”

In Michigan a minister faints minutes before a funeral. So the funeral director desperately calls, asking if I can rush down and perform a service for a person I’ve never met. I arrive, ask for the name, and I’m told, “Jean.” But I realize, after I start the service, that I have no clue whether Jean is a man or a woman. So I call for a silent prayer, tiptoe up to a family member and ask, thinking for sure this will get me the gender, “What relation were you to the deceased?” He responds, “Cousin.”

Seminary also didn’t emphasize the absolute necessity for proofreading. One year I did 42 funerals, eight of them in 12 days. So, in a rush, I ask our secretary to simply change the name “Mary,” who died the week before, to “Gertrude,” today’s funeral, on the service materials. Just as the bulletin is to be run, our organist dashes in, “Did you proof the bulletin?” “Ah, briefly.” “Proof it again.” Then I see that we’re about to confess in The Apostles’ Creed, “I believe . . . in the blessed virgin Gertrude, which would have been a distinct shock to her husband, four children and nine grandchildren.

Ministry has many joys, and moments of heartbreak. As pastors, we’re invited into your most intimate and difficult moments – standing on the shores of Lake Michigan to pray with a young couple holding a tiny vial with the ashes of their two year old daughter who died of SIDS, praying with a couple as they take off their wedding rings in my study, because after years of trying, they can’t make their marriage work, to be called at 2:00 a.m. to a grief-stricken home after four joyriding teens hit a tree at 80 miles an hour.

There I’m asked, “Why?” But in that moment, there is no why! I can only sit and cry with the families. But in such times, the Lord promises, “*I am with you always.*” No pastor can serve without your prayers. So thank you so very much!

I’m often asked, “Do you ever run out of ideas for sermons?” No! Never! Each week I begin with a text, a blank sheet of paper, and a prayer, “Lord, help!” But

with study and perspiration, God's word always provides a message. Late in his ministry, 19th century English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, says, *"I have not even scratched the surface of the inexhaustible depths of Scripture."*

I now know what Spurgeon means. Scripture tells a small child its most basic message, *"Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so."* But Scripture also speaks of realities which we, in this world, can't fully understand, *"In the last days, God will turn machine guns into tractors and bombs into hoes. Nation will not fight against nation, nor will they learn war any more."*

I love our Presbyterian conviction that there is a priesthood of all believers that we ministers are set apart by training, not status. So all of us are to keep our eyes fixed squarely on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. All of us are to bear one another's burdens, to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. All of us are to study Scripture, letting God speak to us, day by day, guiding and strengthening us so we may serve as our Lord's hands, feet and voice. And let's remember these texts:

**Matthew 14:22-36, II Timothy 2:8; Hebrews 12:1-2**

**Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.**

**Fix our eyes on Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith.**

When the parishioners of St. Anselm's Catholic Church in Madisonville, Louisiana, build their new sanctuary in 2011, they build it in the shape of a ship, for a boat, crossing the perilous seas of heresy, worldliness and persecution, is an ancient symbol of the church. Just as the ark saves Noah's family, we find salvation in the church, in the company of one another. The journey is perilous, but Jesus can calm any storm, as He does when the disciples cross the Sea of Galilee. And Jesus is always in the boat with us!

Our text begins with Jesus ordering the disciples to get into the boat. He calls us to be part of a family of faith. Church life is difficult because we're all so different. We're not a bridge group, bowling league, a Save the Whales society or all Cubs fans! We're diverse -- old and young, male and female, gay and straight, wealthy and homeless. We're Republicans, Democrats and Independents, although in our church in Michigan, in Gerald Ford's district, when a Senior Pastor admitted that he voted for Jimmy Carter, oral tradition says that, for long seconds, there was no oxygen in the sanctuary because everyone went, "GASP!" But we come, celebrating our differences, because Jesus calls us to come.

And since we're so different, church leadership is like herding cats. So Ephesians, a circular letter intended for many churches, tells us to remember what we have in common, *"one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us all."* So even Jews and Gentiles are to

be one. How? By *“being humble, gentle and patient, by bearing with one another in love, by keeping the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”*

Nothing cripples the church more than disunity. So pray for one another; treat each other kindly; listen for the voice of Jesus and to one another before speaking, and once a decision is made, give it your wholehearted support!

As the disciples set out, Jesus goes to pray. So remember: Jesus prays for us. Even when we can't pray, Paul encourages the Romans, *“The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know how to pray, but the Spirit intercedes for us.”* Remember, especially during this interim, that the term “communion of saints” means that there is a spiritual connection between all believers in every time and place, so all heaven and earth are always praying for you.

But quickly the disciples' journey turns difficult. This is no luxury cruise. Our text actually says that the waves are “torturing” the boat. So we're not vacationers, who let the crew handle the hard work. We're not here for the entertainment or to judge if the church is meeting our needs. We're here to be equipped to serve. We are disciples who call Jesus both Savior and Lord.

And since Jesus is Lord, we follow Him wherever He leads. We're to storm the gates of hell, to fight evil and injustice, and the spiritual forces of darkness, so we need to keep praying the prayer of the Norwegian fisherman, “Lord, help! The sea is so big, and my boat is so small.”

But we persist; we cannot give up. During the Cuban revolution, one woman opens the Presbyterian Church in Varadera and teaches a handful of children for four years. No one else comes. But now that church is thriving. One woman's faithfulness kept alive the flickering candle of faith and hope. And the living God has blessed her faithfulness, even thirty, sixty and a hundredfold.

Our text doesn't tell us, but the disciples are heading across the Sea of Galilee to Gentile territory, to a place no normal Jew ever went. But such is Jesus' ministry -- He touches lepers, befriends tax collectors and prostitutes, and half-breed Samaritans, despised by observant Jews.

What I so deeply love about you is that you let God lead us beyond the safe and familiar -- you welcomed homeless men into Centennial Hall on cold winter nights; you built a church seating 400 in Malawi; you travel to our sister church in Cuba to visit our brothers and sisters in Christ; you've adopted a girls' school in Pakistan, fighting for women's education; you open our doors for teen moms and AA; you invite as many non-English speakers to ESL Classes as possible, at no cost; you've welcomed over 50 Central Africans as brothers and sisters in Christ, following Jesus, who breaks down every barrier.

But in our text, the storm grows worse; waves threaten to swamp the boat; the disciples grow weary, rowing against the wind. Then at 3:00 a.m. they see a figure walking on the water. In terror, they cry, "It's a ghost!" We moderns think here of Jesus defying gravity. But Matthew's readers know that the sea is the symbol of chaos and evil, of all that defies God's calming rule.

Such chaos is always ready to destroy the boat, the church, just as the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt in August of 2013, torched over 50 churches and hundreds of Christian homes and businesses. But as the disciples cry in terror, Jesus calms them, "*Have courage. It is I. Don't be afraid.*" We remember these words in every time of fear and anxiety!

Peter now takes a risk. Fortified by the presence of Jesus, Peter asks, "*Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*" Indeed, if we want to walk on water, we've must get out of the boat! And fixing his eyes on Jesus, obeying his call, Peter walks on the water towards his Lord, even as the storm rages. With Jesus leading and strengthening us, nothing is impossible!

But, then, Peter takes his eyes off Jesus. He looks down, sees the swirling waters of chaos, and PLUNK! He falls in. If we take our eyes off Jesus, if we stop praying, if we calculate what is possible using only human logic, if we reduce the church to a human organization, spiritual disaster is close at hand.

But, in grace, Jesus reaches out his hand. But He does say, "O you, of little faith, why did you doubt?" Remember this each time you prepare to take a risk! Churches that play it safe, that don't try new things, that don't stay on the cutting edge, won't grow! "To walk on water, we must to get out of the boat!"

Then Jesus and Peter climb into the boat and the wind dies down, leading the disciples to worship Jesus, "You are the Son of God." The storm passes. And what happens next? The group lands in Gentile territory, word spreads, and Jesus and the disciples are besieged with needs. Ministry never stops.

You are a strong, resilient church. You're creative and imaginative, you're passionate about reaching the next generation. You keep thinking of new ways to serve. And you undergird our ministries with what is most important – prayer! In fact, we have a pray-er who is the more diligent pray-er I've ever seen. Let's look. PICTURE OF SQUIRREL. Even in the dead of winter, he or she appears on my window to pray. What faithfulness! What devotion! What trust! Just look at the intensity in that face . . . "Give me my nuts or else!"

So keep your eyes on Jesus. What do you do when you're anxious about our pastoral transition -- keep our eyes on Jesus! What do you do when you dream about a new ministry? Listen to Jesus! What do you do when you're rowing hard and getting weary? Rest in Jesus, knowing He's near. What do you do when all you can see are the waves and the turbulence? Keep your eyes on Jesus, for He

will bring you home safely. And your reward: After you rest awhile, Jesus will say, "Let's get back to work! Bring my light and love wherever there is darkness!" Thank you for the privilege of serving, and may God bless you. Amen.