Our sermon series is “Back to School.” Last Sunday we reflected on the gift of teachers. We remembered that Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher. Those who follow him are disciples, which means students.

Next week we will reflect on that common school question: Is this going to be on the test?

But today we are remembering my favorite class: recess — life on the playground. Recess was the time during the school day when kids would run and scream and laugh, all at the sheer joy of being free for a few moments. Recess was also the place of considerable risk. It was the place that Charles Darwin and his survival of the fittest would show up to play. Cruelty was ever lurking on the playground.

Nevertheless, it was my favorite class. In my school, recess — life on the playground. Recess was the time during the school day when kids would run and scream and laugh, all at the sheer joy of being free for a few moments. Recess was also the place of considerable risk. It was the place that Charles Darwin and his survival of the fittest would show up to play. Cruelty was ever lurking on the playground.

Over on the diamond was the high-risk selection, choosing teams for kickball or sometimes games of dodgeball. Some would play four square or jump rope. Recess was the best. Recess involved no books and no homework. You didn’t have to be quiet. It was my favorite class — most of the time.

But recess was also the place where you have to decide who you are going to be. Mr. Dunning, our teacher, was standing over by the building in the shade. We were on the ball diamond. Dave Davis, smiling a smile that made me uncomfortable, said, “So, Are, what are you going to do?”

This was Bear Elementary School in Montgomery, Alabama. I learned to read there. At Bear School, I learned to write in cursive letters, a skill that I lost 30 years ago. I learned in art class that there will always be a kid who will eat that paste. Do you remember that? And I learned that when Dave Davis spoke, everyone paid attention. I’ll come back to that.

First I want to think with you about Peter. Peter was the first disciple to follow Jesus. We read that story last week. Peter would be a mathetes, a disciple, a student. Jesus would be the rabbi, the teacher. Learning would be a matter of following.

“Come and follow me,” Jesus said. In following Jesus, Peter witnessed Jesus healing Peter’s mother-in-law — and then curing countless others who gathered in Peter’s home. It would be to Peter that Jesus would say, “On this rock I will build my church.” Peter’s name means “rock.”

But it would also be Peter to whom Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan!” And it would be Peter who stood slack-jawed and wanted to build three booths on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Peter, full of courage and a bit of foolishness, would draw a sword to defend Jesus from Roman soldiers — only to be told that’s not how the love of God works in this world. Peter would have his feet washed and his eyes opened and his mouth filled with bread and wine.

And Peter, full of courage and a bit of foolishness, would say, “Lord … command me to come to you on the water.” And just like Jesus did by the Sea of Galilee on that first day, he said, “Come.” Peter stepped out of the boat to follow Jesus on the water. He walked on wa-
ter, for a while, until he began
to drown.

His story is a mixed bag of
grace and fear; of courage and
confrontation; of following and
of running away; of dancing
on the waves and of drowning.
That’s what following looks
like for most of us.

Now let me tell you what
I think this story is about and
what it’s not about. If I asked
you, “How many of you have
walked on water?” I doubt
many of you would raise your
hands. But you have all done
this at one time or another. You
have all walked on water, I’m
convinced.

This is not a story about
having magical powers to defy
the powers of nature. If that is
what this story is about, then
what difference would that
make in your life? No one is
going to say, “Now if you re-
ally have faith, you can walk
across the Missouri River.”
That’s ridiculous. Christian
faith is not about circus tricks,
and to reduce this story to a
circus trick belittles its real
message.

If you read scripture with a
careful eye, then you recognize
that water symbolizes many
things in scripture, but often it
is a metaphor for chaos.

Remember the creation
story? It says when the Spirit
hovered over the waters, it
was “formless void,” chaos.
Life was not possible. It would
take an act of God to push back
the chaos enough to make life
possible.

At the other end of the
Book, the book of Revelation,
it says that in God’s promised
day, “the sea will be no more.”
John is not writing as a travel
agent to declare that there is no
ocean in heaven. That’s not his
point nor his knowledge. He is
saying when God’s promised
day comes in all its fullness,
the chaos that rules our lives
will be destroyed.

This isn’t a story about
aquabatics. It is a story about
following Jesus even when it is
risky; even through the chaos,
choosing to walk where he
walks; even when the whole
world says you can’t walk that
way and survive. Sometimes
we dance on the waves, and
sometimes we drown. But it is
better to be out of the boat, to
be out there with him.

This is why I have chosen
to pair this text with our mes-
sage on recess. Life on the
playground is a good break in
the academic schedule of the
day. It’s good exercise, and we
all need exercise.

But there is learning that
happens on the playground
that doesn’t happen in the
classroom. When we are on
the playground, we have to
decide who we are going to
be — which is why I tell you
about Dave Davis.

Dave Davis was the cool
kid in fourth grade. He was
handsome, although we would
not have known to use that
word. He was funny. At recess,
people would gather around
Dave and bend over laughing.
He was athletic, and stood half
a head taller than the rest of
us. He was cool. Everybody
wanted to be Dave Davis.

Robert was also in my
class. Robert was awkward. He
was a little overweight and not
very comfortable with himself.
He had glasses that kept sliding
down his nose. He was good
at math, but he couldn’t catch
a ball and was slow of foot.
He was quiet, but when he
did speak, his voice betrayed
an insecurity that made him
vulnerable.

And then there was me. I
was never cool, not by a long
shot. But I wasn’t particularly
awkward. I was excessively
bland. I was one of the crowd
— one who would be remem-
bered for no particular reason.

But it was my turn to pick
someone to join our kickball
team. And Davis said, “So, Are,
what are you going to do?” There
were three kids left: Robert and
two girls. In fourth grade, no guy
wants a girl to be chosen ahead
of him for a game.

Dave Davis was just wait-
ing to pounce on Robert for
being picked after a girl or on
me for picking Robert. I looked
right at Robert and said, “I
choose Carla.” I knew Dave
would ridicule one of us, so I
chose Carla and threw Robert
under the bus.

That’s what happened, but
the truth is I don’t remember it.
I can only tell you about it be-
cause a couple of years passed
and things changed. Robert and
I became friends. And in a mo-
moment of honest conversation,
he told me of that day on the
playground of Bear Elementary
School. Some embarrassments
last a long time. Some injuries
are hard to shake.
I would like to tell you that I chose Carla out of some sense of empowering women, but that wouldn’t be true. I would like to tell you that I didn’t know that I hurt him, but I am sure I knew exactly what was happening. I just didn’t care.

That’s the thing about life at recess. You have to decide who you are going to be. Are you going to be one who cares for your neighbor or not?

That’s why I need this story. It says when everything seems to be chaos, Peter, at least for a moment, had the faith, had the courage, to get out of the boat and walk in the same way Jesus would walk. It is possible to walk on water.

J.K. Rowling, the fabulously successful author of the Harry Potter books, says that one of the most profound experiences of her life happened in her 20s. She worked in the London office for Amnesty International. Amnesty International is a human rights organization.

Her work was to catalogue data for Africa. The data, it turns out, was the bits and fragments of testimony of lives that had been destroyed. She read handwritten letters narrating mass executions. She listened to the heartbreaking grief of those who had been tortured. She collected pictures of loved ones who had disappeared.

She said every day she saw the evidence of what human beings would do to one another to gain and maintain power. It gave her nightmares. She said it was also at Amnesty Interna-
tional that she saw the clearest display of human goodness, as people labored tirelessly on behalf of the weak and forgotten to try to bring liberation.

She said, “Unlike other creatures on the planet, human beings can think themselves into other people’s [lives]. This power is morally neutral. One might use such an ability to manipulate or control or to understand and sympathize.”

To say that from the words of our tradition, it is possible for human beings to love the neighbor as the self — which I now see is what Dave Davis was asking me: “Are, what are you going to do? Are you going to love your neighbor or throw him under the bus?”

In one way or another, the world asks us that question every day. And the way we respond, I think, is shaped by our choice to imagine what life is like for our neighbor.

His name was Aylan. We have all seen this toddler washed up on the shore because his daddy wanted him to grow up in a place free from war. It broke our hearts. So many have said, “That could have been my little boy.”

Rowling was right; we could all imagine, to some degree, his father’s grief. And it is that imagination that has moved some folks out of the boat to walk in the way of love to begin to help the helpless.

I see this in you every week. I see it on Tuesday mornings when the women are sharing conversation and machines are humming, sewing hats for little ones that they will never know; but they need them, so the work is done. They call it mission sewing. But I call it walking on water.

Pick any Monday when groceries are gathered and placed in back seats and wishes of “God bless you” are offered. You call it the food pantry, but I call it walking on water.

I see it when emails and phone calls are exchanged on Saturday afternoons as teachers are getting ready to teach. You call it Kids’ Kingdom, but I call it walking on water.

It happens when volunteers open their homes at Christmas-time for a college student from Malaysia or Kenya or perhaps Syria who can’t get home for Christmas break — so she is living with you. You call it Christmas International House, but I call it walking on water.

It will happen five years from now. A young mother will be taking her child to kindergarten, and on the way, she will want to call Mark Williamson, the director of the De La Salle Education Center. She will want to make that call because this week she is bringing her infant to De La Salle; and while she is in algebra class, they are taking care of her child — and they are also helping her learn to become a better mother. She will not know you exist, but it is because of your generosity that she is going to make that call.

You will call this our Signature Mission, but I say you have learned a bit about walking on water.
I could go on.
I am confident of this.
Somewhere out there this week, Dave Davis is going to find you. And he is going to ask, “So, what are you going to do?” And you will have to decide. And when it happens, if you choose to imagine how it is for your neighbor, you may discover that you are walking on water. You may find that you are drowning. But you won’t stay in the boat. You will be following him out there in the chaos.
That’s the better place to be.

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2. De La Salle is the Signature Mission for Village Church in 2016. We are supporting their Paces program, which provides child care and instruction for teenage mothers as an aid to keeping the mothers in school.