



RECESS!

TEXT
Matthew 14:22–33

September 13, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

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 was largely unsupervised. Teachers got a break from controlling every exchange as we hit the playground for a variety of activities. Kids played “Duck, Duck, Goose.” Kids played on swings and climbed monkey bars, as we called them. Some called them jungle gyms.

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 really 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 aquatics. 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 message 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 remembered 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 waiting 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 because a couple of years passed and things changed. Robert and I became friends. And in a 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."¹

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.²

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.

¹J.K. Rowling, *Very Good Lives* (2008), p. 56

²De 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.

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.