

August 13, 2017
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 14, Year A, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
Psalm 105: 1-6, 16-22, 45b
Romans 10:5-15
Matthew 14:22-33

If you're a regular here at St. Thomas's, you know that I'm back after three weeks of vacation. How fortunate am I: I get to work in this truly exceptional community of faith, *and* I get time off to rest and recharge.

Several people have asked what I did on vacation. Besides puttering around the house, the major features of my time away were a week in Maine and a week of rehabbing furniture. Accompanying me throughout that time were my wife, Jakki, my daughter, Morgan, and the nineteenth-century Transcendentalist author-naturalist-philosopher Henry David Thoreau.

There are *many* adjectives one could put before Thoreau's name; the five I used are just the more common ones. He was in the news recently, because his 200th birthday was July 12. I dipped into several books during vacation, including Thoreau's *Maine Woods*. I also slowly consumed a wonderful new biography of his life.¹ Sitting in our rented house by the sea, Jakki and Morgan did their own reading—in between my frequent interruptions with yet another Thoreau fact or story. I'll stop myself from sharing them with you.

But I will say a little. Thoreau remains interesting and important in part because of his original understanding of the connectedness of all things, with results that remain relevant this very day. He was the first person to study how development, spurred by the advent of the global economy, affected life both natural and human. He was himself a small businessman: his cobbled-together living included partnering in the family pencil-making business (even engineering product improvements) and working as a well-regarded surveyor. Nonetheless, Thoreau's observations of the consequences of blind capitalism, in his time and place, fired his passion as both *naturalist* and *abolitionist*.

Naturalist and abolitionist. It's simple to follow the dots from Henry in Concord, Massachusetts, to us in New Haven, Connecticut: the two most important issues of *our* time and place, also related to unfettered capitalism, are environmental justice and racial justice. You've heard me speak about those things from this pulpit before. I always struggle a little, fretting that I'm being more than a little hypocritical. Am *I* walking the walk as well as talking the talk?

Today's Gospel reading features Jesus talking and walking: Jesus prays atop a mountain; Jesus walks on water. The natural environment is essential to the story. Mountains reach up toward heaven; only deities can master the elements. This tells us something about Jesus; those connections are easy to make. We make them and then set them aside, because we are quickly distracted by Peter.

As in other Gospel stories, the disciple I think of as Peter the Impetuous talks first and thinks later. Here and elsewhere, he's often the poor fool who stands in for all the disciples: he says what they think. By extension, he also stands in for us. This week it occurred to me to wonder Peter is actually a fool of a different sort, a fool in the sense of the medieval court jester. As cosmic trickster, Peter just might be the clown master of satire whose role is to take the risks necessary to reveal the truth.

Scholarly analysis of this story commonly focuses on the subject of doubt, and Jesus's jab at Peter for that doubt. In one view, Peter's point of doubt outside the boat, when he realizes what he's done and becomes frightened. Another view places that moment of doubt earlier, inside the boat, when Peter asks Jesus to prove himself. Either way, Peter the Impetuous *unintentionally* gets himself in trouble. What if, instead, Peter the Trickster knows exactly what he's doing? In that scenario, the story is about taking risks *despite* doubt and maybe even *because* of it. It's about staring down the fear of probable failure, leaping out of the boat, taking that improbable walk, reaching out to the God who catches you and carries you—and getting ready to do it all over again. If someone managed to do this once, why would they ever leap a second time? I think it's because of the memory of those few miraculously dancing steps atop the waves.

One of the things hinders *my* action toward racial and environmental justice is *doubt*. It's a type of doubt that surfaces when a problem is terrifyingly daunting in its massiveness and intractability. *My tiny and weak self can't possibly make any difference; I might as well try to walk on water.* In response to such fear and doubt, Peter the Trickster would say, "So what?" (Well, he'd probably say that in a way that was snarkier and funnier.) But his point would be this: It's only by risking the leap that you get even the *chance* to toddle a few watery steps, the miracle of which will provide the antidote to many stormy doubts and fears ahead.

At this point I should credit the poet Denise Levertov. She wrote the poem about Peter walking on water that years ago got me pondering his memory of those steps.² I won't read it now, but I'll leave copies on the piano.

Henry David Thoreau knew a lot of failure in his life. He never was able to support himself with his writing. It took him years to pay off the debt from his first book, which he self-published to practically zero sales. *Walden* had a great start, with critics and buyers, but it also soon fizzled. He struggled with doubt, discouragement, and lengthy serious illness. He suffered grief, watching two of his three siblings and his father all die of that nineteenth-century scourge, tuberculosis. Still, Thoreau kept on, watching, exploring, writing, and compiling a massive body of increasingly innovative work. He too died of TB, at age 44.

Despite failure and tragedy, Thoreau's amazing legacy continues. He is regarded as the founder of environmentalism by many of the activists in that field today. Quite famously, his essay *Civil Disobedience* was an inspiration to both Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

I should acknowledge that Thoreau was famously *not* a churchgoer. He was an early member of the group “Spiritual but not Religious.” He bristled at many of the strictures of the church of his day. Many of his comments about religion were quite scandalous at the time. But most of *us* would take most of them as a given, particularly the Transcendentalist idea of finding God in nature. Spirituality infuses his work, in a way that *we* are perhaps more able to recognize and appreciate than were his churchgoing contemporaries.

As churchgoers ourselves, it’s important to note that American Christianity has a less than stellar history regarding either the environment or race. Even if one goes looking directly to scripture for guidance about either, one is bound to be disappointed. This made it easy, in the 19th century, to open the Bible and find plenty of support for questionable behavior. With the promise of Manifest Destiny, God blessed white America, providing people of color and environmental bounty in service to that end. Manifest Destiny then or American Exceptionalism now, it’s much the same skewed theology that our nation has yet fully confessed to and atoned for. Then and now, there is a different way to read and understand the Bible. There’s a different way to think and act in response. That’s where we come in.

We live at our own unique point in the path of history. Now is the time to act, *for* the environment and *against* racism. You and I have the opportunity to be trickster risk-takers who block the old path and build a new path. *Be* an evangelist, talking about Jesus with your *words* and your *actions*. The way of Jesus is always the way of love and compassion, and there is no shame in claiming that imperative.

Here’s some suggestion about how we can do that work. Notice the size of the storm but don’t fixate on it. Let it inspire and energize you, but don’t let it make you feel hopeless and helpless. Just focus on the water in front of you, and remember you’re not alone. Take a deep breath, and leap. Take one step at a time. You’ll eventually sink. When you do, reach out to God or to God’s designee. Let them dump your soaked self back into that pathetically fragile boat. And let your successes—and your failures—restore you for the next leap to come.

Now, that was the end of this sermon as I completed it yesterday morning at around 11. As we all know, a lot has happened since then. I decided now to change what I wrote, and instead to add to it. So this is my sermon P.S.

The most important work Henry David Thoreau produced during his lifetime were his lectures and essays about slavery. Note, however, that he was the most *visible* but not the *only* member of his family involved with abolition. His mother and two sisters, political players far ahead of their time, were leaders of the local abolitionist movement. They corresponded with and hosted national abolitionist leaders including Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. The family home served as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The sinful outfall of the evil of slavery is still with us. You don't have to be famous or powerful to do something about it. Because I'm should, I'm going to go on and say this: The racism on display since Friday night in Charlottesville is profane. There is no excuse for it, no justification in Christianity or any other system of moral or ethical thought. In this congregation, we all know that. But knowing it, and even repeating it, is not enough.

White people need to step up NOW. It's time to go farther than multicultural awareness and appreciation, time to go farther even than acknowledging and understanding white privilege and intersectionality. Black people have been doing racial justice work for years. There has been amazing progress, and stunning obstruction. It's clear that any significant move forward requires significant participation from white allies. As a lesbian woman, I can speak personally about the power of allies. Justice-seeking queer communities have needed, and will continue to need, straight allies for success.

For a long time I've saying to *myself*, "You need to do more"—without changing a thing. I recently convicted myself of that inaction and began taking a few small steps. I can't dictate the agenda for this congregation as a whole. But I hope *my* dream becomes *yours*. I hope that this congregation leverages its unique combination of human and physical assets to become a racial justice leader in New Haven and in the broader Episcopal Church. We have the potential for partnership with the Day School, which last fall began intentional and ongoing anti-racism work.

I have no idea what any of this looks like yet. But let's get started. The storm is in full gale, and Jesus is calling us.

Notes

¹ Laura Dassow Walls, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

² Denise Levertov, "Poetics of Faith," in *The Stream & the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes* (New York: New Directions, 1997), 37-8.