

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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July 29, 2018

I always love when Biblical themes show up in pop music. This is the case with a song by 30 Seconds to Mars called “Walk on Water.” The refrain of the song is “Do you believe that you can walk on water? Do you believe that you can win this fight tonight?” Later on in the song the phrase “Do you believe” is repeated over and over again. The references to belief and in particular to Jesus are unmistakable. This song written in 2017 harkens back almost 2000 years to what Jesus does in our passage for today.

In addition to walking on water in our passage for today, the other miracle Jesus performs is feeding 5000 people. For both of these miracles, Jesus provides relief from his people’s pain, despite incredible odds and it seeming like it’s impossible.

Despite only starting out with 5 barley loaves and 2 fish, and despite the unbelief of his disciples, Jesus feeds the 5000 people. He takes away their hunger pangs.

And despite the storm and the natural laws of physics, Jesus walks on water to be with his disciples. He then tells his disciples the reassuring words “Don’t be afraid.” He calms their inner pains.

In these 2 examples, Jesus takes away the pain of those around him in different ways. In the feeding of the 5000 he takes away pain with a physical, external action. In walking on water, he takes away pain this with words, to focus on the spiritual, and internal life. Jesus focuses on the external pain in one, and on the internal pain in another. But why doesn’t Jesus in the feeding of the 5000 also preach to the people and give them reassuring words? And why doesn’t Jesus calm the storm?

As I have been going along in my seminary studies, I often feel that just when I think I’ve figured Jesus out, he goes and does something that surprises me. This passage is a prime example. At first, Jesus seems to be saying that we are meant to do works, that we must have some type of physical manifestation of our faith. It seems that Jesus is lifting up that we must work on the external, physical world. He feeds the people bread and fish. Jesus helps the people with a physical need by taking away their hunger pains.

But then, in the very next passage, Jesus does not take away any physical pain. He does not calm the storm. He only speaks to the inner life of the disciples: do not be afraid he says. Here, Jesus is healing the inner life of his disciples. In this example, it seems that the external world does not matter as much compared to the internal spiritual and emotional world.

So where does that leave us? Are we to focus on the external or the internal? This question has been a hot topic at my seminary the last few years, centered on the best ways to do social justice. There were (and still are) 2 camps in how to do social justice work. One says the best way to do social justice work is in protesting. The other says the best way to do social justice work is talking with people one-on-one. The question on everyone's mind is what is the best way to do social justice work?

I believe there is more than one "right" way to do social justice work. I believe there is diversity in the ways we do this type of work.

One of my go-to passages in the Bible is 1 Corinthians 12. This chapter talks about the diversity of our spiritual gifts. Let me read a section for you, starting at verse 4:

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; **5** and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; **6** and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. **7** To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. **8** To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, **9** to another faith by the same Spirit,

Further on the passage compares the diversity of spiritual gifts to the diversity of the body. Let me read that portion to you:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. **13** For in the one Spirit we were

all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

This passage shows that diversity is natural. We are not all supposed to do the same things. Each of us has been given a unique gift.

If I were to rewrite this passage with social justice in mind, it would go something like this:

“Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the gift of protesting, and to another the gift of providing food according to the same Spirit, **9** to another financial resources by the same Spirit, to another the gift of talking with their friends and family about social justice issues, to another the gift of posting to social media, and to another the know-how to change laws.”

I know in myself that protesting is not my strong suit. I fully support the Black Lives Matter movement, and fully support welcoming and embracing immigrants and those in the LGBTQ community. But I feel better equipped to further those causes in one-on-one interactions that I have with my friends and family. But that’s just me. There are those who are so much better and comfortable protesting. And that’s great because we need people like that. When each of us are living in our spiritual gifts around social justice issues, we have a better chance of achieving our goals.

People of Wicker Park Lutheran Church, Jesus healed the pain of those around him. In some instances, Jesus healed the physical pain, in other instances Jesus healed the internal pain. This shows a diversity in the ways of helping people. There are a variety of ways of living out our baptismal promise to “Work for justice and peace.” We are one body, but many members. We each have unique spiritual gifts. We have unity in our diversity.

The 30 seconds to Mars song that I began my sermon with, frames the social justice question well: “Do you believe that you can walk on water? Do you believe that you can win this fight tonight?”

When we all work together, using the diversity of our spiritual gifts, we can bring about change and healing to our broken world. We can win the fight.