

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel, Year B

STILLING A STORM

Mark 4:35-41

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Matthew DeLoera

35 On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." 36 And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. 37 A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" 39 He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. 40 He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" 41 And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

DIAGNOSIS: Steering Our Own Boat

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Setting Afloat in a Leaky Boat—Bad Plans

With the disciples, Jesus has been teaching a large crowd beside the Sea of Galilee. Evening arrives, and it is time to head to the other side because, as Mark makes clear, there's always another waiting crowd in need. But, the journey soon becomes perilous. We modern disciples encounter likewise. We've always been taught that service is a mark of discipleship, a fruit of the Spirit, and off we go into a world that perpetually needs our help. Which occasionally means we inject ourselves where

we're not necessarily wanted or needed, but the devil is in the details. Of course, when you go and get yourself involved with people, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. We find ourselves entangled in risks and dangers (furious squalls). We overestimate our ability to help and become overwhelmed (our boat becomes swamped). Sometimes we hurt more than we help (we fail to reach the other side).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Tempest-Tossed and Rudder Lost—Failed Plans

We help with murky motives. We always have an agenda. We want to prove that we really are good people. We seek out someone who we can save from themselves, like a construction project. We want to atone for something. We're strong-armed into serving. Deep-down, we're not selfless but selfish. But perhaps we reason that if these good works somehow do help, who cares? Don't the ends justify the means? Who could blame us? Except, why are we so contorted and frustrated when we're finally doing what we're supposed to do? What if Jesus isn't leading us into selfless service, but unnecessary hardship ("Let us go over to the other side")? Besides, isn't Jesus supposed to be helping us ("Don't you care if we drown")? Where is he when we need him ("sleeping on a cushion")?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Sunken by Storms—Out of Plans

Jesus rebukes the wind and waves, yet the disciples remain terrified. They haven't yet recognized the Messiah in their midst (6:29). He rightly asks them why they should be so afraid, and names their abject lack of faith ("Do you still have no faith"). By all external appearances, we are equally faithless. Concerned more for ourselves than our neighbors, we fail to give freely. Failing to help others, we do not witness the Spirit bearing fruit in us. Unsure whether we're really helping, we look for a sign but never find it. Inevitably causing harm, we

know we'll be convicted. We don't really wonder what God must think of us, because we know we failed, and deep-down we know God doesn't give partial credit.

PROGNOSIS: Drifting in Jesus' Boat

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Storms Subsided by Jesus

By all external appearances, Jesus failed too, dying on a cross of wood. But appearances deceive, for this is the beloved Son, who comes to give his whole self for our sake. In the cross, he takes all our sin and selfishness upon himself willingly, just to give us his own righteousness, in the gift of faith. And he does it with a simple phrase: "I forgive you." This forgiveness is the one and only final word for us, not because we sought it, but because Jesus sought us. Not even the fiercest, deadliest squall will stand in his way. He always gets what he wants, and what he wants is you and me—audaciously, he calls us his disciples in spite of our floundering.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Afloat on the Waves with Jesus

By faith, we see the wind and waves and know they will not destroy us, because the foremost fruit of faith is unassailable hope. This kind of hope lets us dare to relax (sleep on a cushion) in the face of a raging storm, knowing that all storms finally abate. Sure, storms can still be deadly, but by hope we do not even fear death, because we trust what Jesus will have to say to us, calling us his good and faithful servants. But that's not what we're thinking about right now. We're freed from all this preoccupation with worst-case scenarios, just so that we CAN freely serve our neighbors (we head to the other side). Our hope impels us to act even though we may not fully understand what we're doing, or need to do, simply because we love our neighbors.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Drifting in the Calm of Jesus with Others

Of course, we're still full of bad ideas, bless our hearts. We're always getting ourselves involved with people, and getting in over our heads. But even when we fail spectacularly—and we will—we know that this failure is not the final word. What looks like failure today may unfold into lasting benefits for our neighbors tomorrow. We might never even get to see the true fruit of our labors at all. Besides, we're not the only disciples (there are other boats), and they will thankfully step in and act in ways we never considered. It was never up to us alone in the first place, and knowing all this, we embody a calmness that others notice. Some will be annoyed, thinking us irresponsible or short-sighted. Yet, this calmness is strangely contagious, and in the end, might actually be our most needful service of all.