

Do you remember the last time you felt the challenges of life surround you? How did you deal with it? Did you want to panic? Did you want to run away? Did you want to crawl under a rock? What did you do?

In 1914, the inventor Thomas Edison was walking home from his labs when a messenger caught up with him to tell him his lab was on fire. By the time he got back to the lab, most of it was gone. Edison knew that there was nothing he could do. He found his son Charles and said, "Get mother and her friend over here. They'll never see a fire like this again," he told his son.

The next morning he went to inspect the rubble. Friends, who tried to offer platitudes telling him he should retire, were met with Edison's observation that "I am only sixty-seven years old, and I am not too old to start over again."

The only problem is that he didn't have enough money to build another lab as nice as the first. As he walked around the debris, his friend Henry Ford came by. Ford did not stay around long. He simply gave Edison a check for \$750,000 and said, "Let me know if you need more."

Edison eventually paid off his loan to Ford. And some of Edison's best inventions came after the fire. Thomas Edison faced the challenge of the fire, by not walking away from it. But he embraced it, and through the help of a good friend, he was able to get back up and start over again.

The reality is that all of us will have to deal with challenges at some point in our lives, if we haven't already. And those challenges will strike fear into our hearts. We will be tempted to run from them. We will be tempted to sit down and have a good cry (which is sometimes a pretty good option). We will be tempted to panic. We may even be tempted to retire. What do you do when the challenges of life begin to impact you?

In our scripture for today, the disciples are facing challenges. In an earlier passage Jesus has just finished feeding 5,000 people. At the end of the day, Jesus sends the disciples ahead of him in a boat, across the sea. While he stays behind saying goodbye to the people and then taking time to pray.

Meanwhile the disciples are in the boat and while they are crossing the sea a storm comes up and begins to threaten their lives. They become scared. They become even more scared when they see Jesus coming to them across the water.

Yet Jesus comforts them by saying, "Take courage, it's me. There's no need to panic. Don't be afraid."

The disciples are facing the panic of a tenuous situation. Their boat is being battered by the wind and the waves. And they don't really understand what is happening as Jesus walks to them.

Peter, looked at Jesus and said, "Master, it's really you, call me to come to you on the water."

Jesus said, "Come here."

Jumping out of the boat, Peter walks to Jesus on the water, until . . . until he looked down and saw the churning of the water and the turbulence around him . . . and he panicked and he began to sink.

Do you ever panic in times of trouble? Do you ever take your eyes off of Jesus when things don't go your way? I know I have in the past. I have seen others do it too.

Today, we are continuing our sermon series, *Sharpening Our Focus: Understanding the Purpose of the Church*. We are using our mission statement as the basis for what we are talking about. Today, we are talking about worship.

Would you please turn in your bulletin and read with me our Mission Statement? *The Mission of Sun Prairie United Methodist Church is to invite and welcome people to be committed and compassionate followers of Jesus Christ through worship, through spiritual growth, through fellowship, and through service to others.*

Last week, we talked about the importance of inviting and welcoming all people, even people who are different from us, to let Christ be at the center of their lives. That commitment to let Christ be at the center of lives is also one we need to make as well.

We are called, like Peter was, to keep our eye on Christ. Because as we step into the future, sometimes our steps are made in the midst of turbulence and on ground that feels like it is churning. When we keep our eyes on Christ, when we stay focused on our mission, then we can stay above water, so to speak.

The problem for the church - and to be honest with you - the problem for us as individuals is when we take our eyes off of Christ and off of our

mission statement. When we don't place first things first, then we end up sinking and making decisions that get us deeper and deeper into trouble.

The importance of making worship a priority for our life is it is a way we allow ourselves to place God first. Coming here reminds us that we don't have to live a life of faith alone. Coming here reminds us that there are others on this journey of faith. Coming here reminds us that God loves us and that God won't abandon us when life gets tough.

In fact, in our scripture, twice when the disciples are in trouble, Jesus responds. The first time he walks on the water to them. The second time as Peter sinks, he cries out to Jesus, "Save me!" And Jesus reached down, grabs him, and pulls him to safety.

This scripture reminds us that Jesus will be there for us. But we need to stay focused on Jesus and placing Jesus at the center of our life.

In closing, let me take you back to the 1924 World Series between Washington and New York. It is the final game of the series with each team having won three times. In the first inning, Washington scored once, New York scored once. When you move ahead to the ninth inning, the score is still tied, one to one.

In the bottom of the ninth inning, New York is up to bat. The first hitter strikes out. The second hitter strikes out. The third hitter comes up to the plate. Strike one, strike two. Ball one. Ball two. Ball three. Can you sense the drama? Can you feel the tension in the crowd? This is the last inning of the last game of the World Series. It is a full count; it could be the last pitch of the game. The last out. This is it!!

The pitcher gives a tremendous wind-up and a blazing fastball comes into home. The batter swings and gets a hold of this fastball, sending high and far, into the left field. It looks like it is going over the fence. The crowds in New York go wild.

Then, all of a sudden, the wind catches it. It slowly begins to drift down and back. When the ball comes down, it lands on top of the wall and into the field of play.

By this time the runner has come around first. When he sees what is happening he starts running with all his might, tagging second, heading for third. The outfielder meanwhile is having a hard time getting a handle on it. When he finally gets a handle on it, he throws it toward the infield.

By the time the ball is coming in, the runner has come around third base and is headed for home. The shortstop catches it and turns to throw it home. Here comes the ball. Here comes the runner. The runner slides. The catcher tags him just a bit late and the crowds are going wild, thinking they had won the World Series.

But, when the dust settles, this big, blind umpire says, "The batter is out."

People went ballistic. "How could he be so blind?" The manager came out of the dugout screaming. There was pandemonium throughout the stadium as people couldn't believe what they had heard.

The umpires quieted everything down. They gathered to talk about what they were going to do. Then the head umpire came to a microphone and said, "The batter is out, because he failed to touch first base."

I like that story. Putting first things first means touching all the bases. When it comes to developing a life of faith it means placing Christ at the center of who we are. Then it means nurturing that relationship by making such things as worship a priority in our life.

In all honesty, there will be moments of challenge in our life. Those moments of challenge will tempt us to look away from Jesus and try to handle life on our own. It is my hope and prayer that we will learn to place first things first, that we will make worship a priority as we seek to be faithful to God.

May God help us to live lives of faith.

Amen