

We are finishing a sermon series called, *Living Freely, Unbinding Your Heart*. This series has been about discovering faith for yourself, so that you can find ways to share faith with others.

In our scripture for today, Jesus has sent the disciples on ahead of him, so he could pray. When he realized they were in trouble, he came walking to them upon the water. When Peter saw Jesus he said, "Master, if it's you, tell me to come you by walking on the water."

And Jesus said, "Come." So Peter went over the boat and began walking toward Jesus. But when he took his eyes off of Jesus, he saw the high waves and he became terrified and started to sink.

What the author of Matthew wants us to know is that as people of faith, we are in some dangerous water. The opportunities for distraction abound all around us. And when we as people of faith take our eyes off of Jesus, it is easy to become afraid, to become overwhelmed.

In the early part of the Methodist Movement, as people were turning to God, they came to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and asked, "How can we grow in faith?" John Wesley offers the following advice in the form of simple rules to follow, so that we can stay focused on Christ.

First, do no harm. Are you treating other people in a way that is filled with respect, integrity and care?

Second, practice works of piety. Build into your life the discipline of daily scripture reading. Get involved in some type of fellowship group. Make a practice of praying each day. Attend worship at every opportunity you can.

Third, practice works of mercy. AS often as you can, take the time to do good to others. Put your faith into action in the world and be willing to alleviate suffering. Be willing to engage in Holy Conversation.

Wesley understood that focusing on faith, is what helps us to connect with God and grow in faith. Are you willing to focus on your faith? Are you willing to grow in your love for God?

What I know from being around churches for the last twenty years, is that when members of the church are willing to focus on faith, God is able to work through that church in remarkable ways. But when members begin to see all the distractions, all the high waves, problems begin to arise. When we get caught up in protecting turf or how we have always done things, it is easy to lose sight of what is important in the church.

I am learning that faith allows God to work in our lives in a way that defies ordinary, human experience. There was once a small congregation in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains that built a new sanctuary on a piece of land that had been willed to them by a church member. Ten days before the new church was to open, the local building inspector came and informed the pastor that the parking lot was inadequate for the size of the building. Until the church doubled the size of the parking lot, they would be unable to use the new sanctuary.

Unfortunately, the church with its undersized parking lot had used every inch of their land except for the mount against which it had been built. In order to build more parking spaces, they would have to move the mountain out of the backyard.

Undaunted, the pastor announced the next Sunday morning that he would meet that evening with all members who had "mountain moving faith." They would hold a prayer session asking God to remove the mountain from the back yard and to somehow provide enough money to have it paved and painted before the scheduled opening dedication service the following week.

At the appointed time, 24 of the congregation's 300 members assembled for prayer. They prayed for nearly three hours. At 10:00 PM, the pastor said the final, "Amen." "We'll open next Sunday as scheduled," he assured everyone. "God has never let us down before, and I believe God will be faithful this time too."

The next morning, as he was working at his office, there was a loud knock on his door. When he called, "Come in," a rough looking construction foreman appeared, removing his hard hat as he entered. "Excuse me Reverence, I'm from a Construction Company over in the next county. We're building a huge new shopping mall over there and we need some fill dirt. Would you be willing to sell us a chunk of that mountain behind the church?"

We'll pay you for the dirt we remove and pave all the exposed area free of charge, if we can have it right away. We can't do anything else until we get the dirt in and allow it to settle properly."

The little church was dedicated the next Sunday as originally planned, and there were many more members with "mountain moving faith" on opening Sunday than there had been the previous week! My question for you, is would you have shown up for the prayer meeting?

Many of us are so like Peter, walking on the water. We get distracted easily by the challenges around us. This is why it is important for us to focus on faith and to work at building practices into our life that help us become more and more aware of God and God's presence. May God help us develop a life of faith.

Amen