
Halfway Across

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 14, Year A

There's a kind of tiredness that sleep doesn't touch.

Peter knew it. On the last night, Jesus kneels with a basin and a towel to wash Peter's feet — and Peter cannot bear it. *You will never wash my feet*, he says. Never.

Here is a man who will follow Jesus onto the water, draw a sword for him, swear to die for him. But ask him to sit still and be knelt before — ask him only to be washed, only to be received — and everything in him locks shut.

And when he finally gives in, he can't even do it simply: *then not just my feet — all of me, hands and head*. It's all or nothing with Peter. The one thing he can't do is let things happen quietly.

That's the tiredness I mean.

It doesn't come from falling apart. It comes from not falling apart — from holding the door shut with both hands, year after year, against something on the other side that only wants in.

We think the answer is to become stronger. To get ourselves together. To master whatever keeps pressing against that door.

Peter tried strength.

He was brave enough to step out of the boat. Brave enough to draw a sword. Brave enough to promise he would die before he would abandon Jesus.

But strength was never Peter's problem.

His deepest struggle was simpler than that.

He didn't know how to receive. He could leap before anyone else. He could fight before anyone else. But he could not let sit there and let others care for him. He could not simply be loved.

The tiredness comes when we spend our lives holding ourselves together — holding the door shut against the very grace that keeps asking to come in.

Back to Peter, out on the water.

It is the middle of the night. The disciples are far from shore. The wind is against them. They are rowing and getting nowhere.

A figure comes toward them, walking on the water. They don't shout for joy. They scream. They think it is a ghost. The one face that could save them, taken for something in the dark that has come to destroy them.

That is often how he comes: so close, and so unlike what we expected, that we mistake him for a threat.

Then Peter says the boldest thing anyone says in the whole Gospel. *Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.*

Listen to that.

He doesn't say, "I'll come." He doesn't say, "Watch this." He waits for a word that is not his own.

Jesus says only one thing: *Come.*

Peter will trust the voice before he trusts himself.

That is faith.

And Peter climbs over the side and stands on the sea. It is real. A man is walking on water because Someone called him there, his eyes fixed on the one face holding him up.

And then he looks away — at the wind.

We go where we look.

Eyes on Jesus, he walks; eyes on the storm, he goes where he is looking — down. It was not the stepping out that sank him, for Jesus called him out; and his faith was not fake — it was real enough to walk.

What sank him was trying to watch two things at once — Jesus, and the storm.

And no one crosses deep water looking two ways at once. So, he goes under. And the instant he does — before one word of correction — the hand is there, taking hold of him while he is still going down.

The rescue comes first.

Only after Peter is already held does Jesus ask, gently, *why were you of two minds?* — the word Matthew uses means standing in two places at once. Jesus didn't ask "why did you fail," or "how dare you try" — only, why did you look away?

He caught Peter the second he stopped being able to save himself.

It is like when we learned to float.

Every instinct in us says fight the water. Head up. Kick. Work. And fighting the water is exactly how people drown.

What we finally must do feels almost like dying. Lie back. Stop kicking. Let the water come up over our ears.

And then we discover something that had been true all along.

We were never holding ourselves up.

The One who called Peter onto the water had been holding him long before Peter knew it. The hand that caught him was not an emergency measure. It was the same hand that had called him out of the boat in the first place.

There is the whole gospel in a swimming lesson.

We do not save ourselves by trying harder.

We discover we are already being held.

This is why the answer to the tiredness we started with is not another effort to become stronger. It is stranger, and far kinder. *Lose your life*, he said, *and you will find it.*

Not improve it. Not defend it. Let it open. Let the water come up over the self we have been holding together by sheer force — and find on the way down, the hand that was already there.

Go back to Peter one last time.

After the walking and the sinking, after the night he stood beside a charcoal fire and swore three times he never knew Jesus, the risen Christ meets him beside another charcoal fire on the beach. Jesus rebuilds the scene of Peter's greatest failure — not to shame him, but to redeem it.

Three denials become three invitations.

Do you love me?

Do you love me?

Do you love me?

— asked once for each denial, asked until it hurt.

And then Jesus tells him how the story will end.

When you were young, you fastened your own belt and went wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will carry you where you do not wish to go.

That is Peter's whole life in one sentence.

Young Peter was always holding himself together.

Old Peter has learned to receive.

He has learned to stretch out empty hands.

Tradition says he was crucified upside down, because he did not consider himself worthy to die as his Lord had died. Whether or not we linger over the details, the image remains: the man who could not bear to have his feet washed finishes his life with open hands, letting himself be carried all the way home.

Perhaps each of us already knows the door we have been holding shut.

The grudge we cannot release.

The help we keep refusing.

The grief we carry so gracefully that no one suspects its weight.

We were never meant to hold that door shut.

Our hands were made to open.

And when they do, we discover they are not empty. They are already being held. And the voice that comes across the water is the same one that has been speaking all along:

Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.

Amen.