

Matthew 14C

- Last week we studied what I proposed was Jesus' most powerful lesson on the nature of ministry in the Kingdom Program
 - Jesus miraculously fed five thousand men plus women and children through the hands of His disciples while on a hillside of the Galilee
 - And by the way He did it, Jesus was teaching the disciples a number of lessons about serving God
 - Jesus taught them they must be prepared to serve people in need, not holding their needs against them
 - They must return to Jesus for their spiritual supply, abiding in Him both direction and sustainment in the course of their work
 - He showed them that miracles would come to pass in the by-and-by of their work, yet miracles wouldn't overshadow their labors
 - On the contrary, their ordinary labor would typically be the only thing the people saw
 - Yet behind the scenes, the Lord would be at work producing unseen miracles by the hands of His disciples
 - So that in the end, the work would get done and everyone would be blessed, and the Lord receives the glory
 - That opening lesson forms the foundation for all that Jesus will teach His disciples on the Kingdom Program
 - And of course, we should assume the disciples understood and internalized that lesson, right?
 - Well, not so fast...because as we see in today's passage from Matthew, they actually missed it entirely
 - In fact, they didn't just fail to understand Jesus' lesson, they came to resent it

[Matt. 14:22](#) Immediately He made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of Him to the other side, while He sent the crowds away.

[Matt. 14:23](#) After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone.

- As the miracle ends, Jesus tells His disciples to get back into their boat and cross the sea to Capernaum
 - As I explained last time, the miracle of the five thousand happens in a mostly uninhabited region on the NE corner of the lake
 - It was near a small fishing village called Bethsaida
 - The miracle took place as nightfall was approaching, and now that the feeding has concluded, it's become dark
 - And at that point, Matthew says Jesus instructs His disciples to return to Capernaum by boat without Him
 - Jesus' order was a little strange, first because generally speaking people didn't travel at night
 - And traveling across the Galilee at night was not the norm, and there doesn't seem to be any compelling reason to leave now
 - And secondly, Jesus doesn't travel with these men, but this is the only boat they have
 - And once more the other Gospels are immensely helpful in giving us the context we need to understand what Jesus is doing here
 - First, we go to John's account, where we read the following

[John 6:14](#) Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world."

[John 6:15](#) So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

[John 6:16](#) Now when evening came, His disciples went down to the sea,

[John 6:17](#) and after getting into a boat, they started to cross the sea to Capernaum. It had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.

- John tells us that at some point during the feeding, the crowd realized that a miracle had just taken place in their midst
 - I assume they didn't know that Jesus started with just five loaves and two fish
 - But even so, it wouldn't require a genius to notice that thousands of people had just been fed on a desolate mountainside

- And Jesus wasn't sitting next to a warehouse of food
- So eventually the murmurs begin and before it's over, the people are calling Jesus the promised Prophet, the one Moses said would come
 - As we learned last week, this was a re-enactment of the Exodus story with Jesus playing the part of Charlton Heston
 - Jesus set out with His disciples to cross a body of water leading a large group of Jews into a desolate place
 - When they arrived, they cried out for food, so Jesus fed them miraculously with bread from heaven
- The crowd recognized that picture so they conclude Jesus is the prophet Moses promised would come one day in Deuteronomy
 - Moses said the Lord would raise up another prophet like Moses one day
 - And the people now see Jesus as that promised prophet
 - But based on the bad teaching of the Pharisees, the people expected the Prophet to conquer Israel's political enemies
 - So they think Jesus has come to set them free from Roman tyranny just as Moses set Israel free from Egyptian slavery
 - So the people are ready for revolution
 - John says they were preparing to take Jesus to Jerusalem and install Him as their king
 - We know the time for Jesus to become King had passed, so of course Jesus can't allow that to happen
 - So He retreats further up the mountainside to prevent the crowds acting
 - And then Matthew says in v.22 that Jesus sends the crowds away as He retreats to pray
 - So if Jesus planned to send the crowds away, why does Jesus send His disciples away too?
 - And why send them away at night, alone without Jesus?
 - And doesn't Jesus know it's not good to go out in the water on a full stomach?

- This mystery deepens even further when we consult a map of the scene
 - Capernaum is located only a short distance from Bethsaida, as the crow flies, directly across the northern tip of the lake
 - Last week we learned that as Jesus and the disciples set out by boat to reach Bethsaida, the crowds were able to follow on foot
 - In fact, the crowds arrived in Bethsaida more or less at the same time that Jesus arrived
 - When we look at a map, we can see why that was possible
 - The two locations are very close together, easily within walking distance
 - And in fact, the distance is so short that a boat sailing that route would never be more than a short distance off shore
 - Understanding the geography makes us wonder why did Jesus take the effort to sail at all?
 - And the answer is obvious... Jesus chose to travel by water as part of the lesson He wanted to teach these men
 - We know Jesus crossed the water on the way to Bethsaida to draw a connection to Moses crossing the Red Sea in Exodus
 - And now He's sending His disciples back by water – alone and at night – because He wants to teach them another lesson
 - No, actually Jesus is going to teach them the *same* lesson again, because the disciples didn't learn it the first time
 - To understand what I mean, let's remember what that lesson was all about
- Back in v.15 the disciples told Jesus that the hungry crowds were a problem, so Jesus should send them away
 - And I told you that the disciples' thinking was upside down
 - They had a Pharisaic perspective on how to do ministry
 - Ministry was a position of honor, so they expected to have a place above the people
 - And they perceived the people themselves as a burden

- But Paul taught we are called to bestow greater honor on those who are spiritually weaker within our body
 - Instead of resenting those who come with needs, we should honor them with our spiritual service
 - Their weaknesses give purpose to our spiritual gifts, because if someone in the body needed us, how could we do ministry?
- That was the lesson Jesus wanted to teach these men...that ministry is by definition an act of selfless service
 - Ministry isn't some reality TV show you win by popularity
 - And ministers aren't rock stars among the people, primping and posing on stage to impress and receive an ovation
 - We don't roll up in our luxury cars and ride our private elevators to the penthouse suite while people kiss our rings
- That's lording over people and when God's people forget this truth and let the flesh take control, pride kicks in and ruins ministry
 - We have an excellent example of this problem recorded in the letter Paul wrote to the church in Corinth
 - That church body fell into the trap of lording
 - They thought ministry meant receiving honor and privilege rather than bestowing honor on others
- So at one point in his letter, Paul begins to mock the Corinthians' self-importance by reminding them how the apostles conducted ministry

1Cor. 4:7 For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

1Cor. 4:8 You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.

1Cor. 4:9 For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.

1Cor. 4:10 We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor.

1Cor. 4:11 To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless;

[1Cor. 4:12](#) and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure;

[1Cor. 4:13](#) when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now.

- Paul asked the Corinthians, who regards you as superior? What did you have that you didn't receive?
 - What a great line...the church was so prideful because they thought they knew so much about Christ
 - They took pride in all their knowledge and (ironically) their supposed spiritual maturity
 - Yet nothing they had come by themselves...it was all delivered by someone
 - Someone taught them the truth, exhorted and corrected them to follow the truth, and modeled the truth
 - Whatever the Corinthians had in terms of spiritual maturity, they must have received it from someone who had it before they did
 - And those "someones" were none other than the apostles
 - Men like Paul and Barnabas and Peter visited the city at various times and imparted spiritual knowledge to the Church
 - How honored were those believers to be ministered to by such great men?
 - Yet Paul says that church saw itself as distinguished and worthy of honor even as those who taught them were being martyred
- So Paul asks the church to consider how distinguished were their teachers?
 - Did Paul roll up in a Mercedes chariot?
 - Did Barnabas demand the Caesar Suite in the Corinthian Hyatt?
 - Did Peter require the people to carry him on their shoulders and lavish him with comfort and splendor?
 - No...Paul says the apostles were the least among all men

- They were fools for Christ, without honor, exhibited as spectacles before men and angels
- At times they went hungry and thirsty, were poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless, and made to toil with their hands
- When they were reviled by those they tried to serve, they blessed them in response
 - When they were persecuted, they endured it without resistance
 - When they were slandered, they sought to reconcile
- In short they became as the scum of the earth, refuse of the world
 - And why? Because that's the job of ministry...to serve the weak, the immature, the unlovable
 - Because that's exactly what Jesus did for us first
- That was the lesson Jesus was trying to teach the disciples on that mountainside
 - Jesus made those men feed five thousand people to make a point that ministry is serving others, not ourselves
 - And after such a vivid demonstration, surely the apostles got the message right?
 - Well, this may surprise you, but no, they didn't learn the lesson
 - In fact, the entire experience turned them even more against the people
 - So as they say, there's an easy way to learn a lesson and a hard way...and the disciples are about to learn it the hard way

[Matt. 14:24](#) But the boat was already a long distance from the land, battered by the waves; for the wind was contrary.

[Matt. 14:25](#) And in the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea.

[Matt. 14:26](#) When the disciples saw Him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear.

- Matthew gives us a rather brief description of the disciples' experience in the boat

- He says they were already a long distance from the land when this incident took place
 - Having seen the maps, we know they couldn't have been that far from the land
 - That means Matthew was speaking from the perspective of the men inside the boat...they felt they had rowed 3-4 miles
 - They assumed they were blown off course, a long way from the shore because of the darkness and the weather
- Mark tells us that the disciples were straining at the oars against a wind that was opposing them in the journey
 - In fact, they are going so slow, that it's now the fourth watch of the night, which is between 3-6 AM
 - Normally, these guys should have made that journey in less than a couple of hours of rowing
 - But because of a head wind, they've been rowing for 6 hours or more and they still haven't reached Capernaum
- Furthermore, the Sea of Galilee is hundreds of feet below sea level, which makes the air heavy and hazy
 - Even in broad daylight, it can be hard to see across the lake though it's only a few miles wide
 - So at night it can be like sailing in fog, and these guys are hopelessly lost and worn out and worried by the storm
- And then out of that foggy darkness comes Jesus walking on the stormy water
 - Jesus couldn't have made a more dramatic entrance, and it has the desired effect on the disciples
 - At first they don't know it's Jesus but think it's a ghost in the fog
 - They assume it must be a ghost because they know flesh can't walk on water, and this just frightens them all the more
 - But then as Jesus gets closer they recognize Him, yet that doesn't comfort them
 - Mark says they are terrified at the sight of Jesus walking on the water

- But Mark says something else that's critically important to understanding Jesus' purpose in this experience

Mark 6:48 Seeing them straining at the oars, for the wind was against them, at about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea; and He intended to pass by them.

- Mark says the men were straining at the oars, and the wind was against them and it was late...and then Jesus comes into view
 - But Jesus wasn't walking *toward* the boat...He was walking *by* the boat
 - What was He trying to accomplish by walking past them?
- Jesus has set these guys up...He's put them on the water at night, together, in a tough situation
 - They've been working on their own, getting nowhere fast
 - Then, just when they needed someone to help them, Jesus appears
 - And they are afraid of Him because His supernatural power is overwhelming and unexpected
- Then they notice Jesus isn't looking at them...He's walking by as if they weren't even there
 - They realize Jesus isn't going to stop or help them
 - So the men cry out to Jesus partly out of fear and partly out of desperation
 - They're in trouble, and they need help...if only Jesus would take pity on them in their time of need
 - But what a burden they are!
 - Jesus doesn't have time for their problems...He's cruising above the waves on His way to Capernaum
 - So they cry out to Jesus in fear, Matthew says
 - And in response to their fear, Jesus turns aside and comes to their aid

- It's obvious from the circumstances and the geography that Jesus has placed them in this storm to teach them a lesson
- And that lesson is closely connected to the prior lesson
- In fact, this is the same lesson, only it's being taught in a different way because they didn't get the point the first time
 - How do I know this? Because Mark tells us so

Mark 6:50 for they all saw Him and were terrified. But immediately He spoke with them and said to them, "Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid."

Mark 6:51 Then He got into the boat with them, and the wind stopped; and they were utterly astonished,

Mark 6:52 for they had not gained any insight from the incident of the loaves, but their heart was hardened.

- Mark's footnote to the whole episode is the key detail to explain why this incident happened
 - In v.52 Mark says "for", meaning as a result of or because
 - In other words, Jesus brought about these events because the disciples had not gained insight from the incident of the loaves
 - And why didn't they get the message? Because Mark says they had hard hearts
- A hardened heart means a stubborn refusal to repent from sin, to learn a lesson and choose a different path
 - Originally, they wanted those crowds to leave and feed themselves
 - Then Jesus demanded the disciples feed the crowd, and Jesus provided the food
- But those guys were still upset that they had to be waiters for 5,000+ people on that mountainside
 - They trekked up and down that hillside for a couple of hours, feeling unappreciated
 - Perhaps they thought such work was beneath them, or perhaps they resented the way Jesus made them beg for leftovers

- Jesus wanted them to understand that true ministry is about service not status
 - It was supposed to show them that greatness in ministry, that is true honor, is found by serving others not being served
 - But they didn't get the message; instead, they got their feelings hurt
- So after the feeding, I think Jesus thought to Himself... "OK boys, you can learn this the easy way or the hard way... let's try the hard way... get in the boat"
 - And so Jesus puts those privileged "ministers" in a difficult position of their own, where their needs will become the issue
 - He traps them on the water, in a small boat, by themselves, at night, weary and lost and scared
 - They are as lost sheep bleating for a shepherd to rescue them
 - They have now become the burden
 - Then to increase the pressure, Jesus stirs up the waves, gives them a headwind, puts them in a little fog...
 - And then He starts walking toward them, on the water no less, displaying His power and authority
 - The point should be obvious... Jesus is the One with power and privilege; He's the One worthy of honor
 - They need Jesus! Jesus doesn't need them... Jesus doesn't even need a boat!
 - So now that the sandal is on the other foot, and suddenly these guys are the ones who need the help, Who do they cry out for?
 - Naturally, they cry out to Jesus expecting Him to rescue them
 - John tells us that when Jesus turned aside to help them, they were "willing" to receive Jesus into the boat... I bet they were!
 - They had hard hearts toward others in need, but when it was their turn to need ministry, they gladly received Jesus' help
- That's why Jesus intended to pass by... He wanted to remind them of two things

- First, He wanted them to appreciate how it feels when a shepherd shows no concern for the flock
 - When a minister displays an unloving, hard-hearted attitude toward a flock in need, it's the opposite of ministry
 - It's incompatible with serving Jesus in the Kingdom Program
 - Now obviously, Jesus did have concern for them... Jesus was merely pretending to have no concern to make His point
- Secondly, Jesus wanted them to remember that everyone has needs, especially Christ's ministers
 - We all sin so we all need Christ's forgiveness, and each other's forgiveness
 - We all have weakness, so we all need Christ to give us spiritual strength, and usually it comes through others in the body
 - And we all benefit from an opportunity to serve in our spiritual gift, and Jesus will put people in need around us for that reason
- In fact, Jesus will create trials in people's lives specifically to make opportunity for ministry to happen, as He did in this situation
 - And speaking of which, there was one disciple in particular that needed to appreciate this lesson, perhaps more than the rest

Matt. 14:27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

Matt. 14:28 Peter said to Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."

Matt. 14:29 And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

Matt. 14:30 But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

Matt. 14:31 Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Matt. 14:32 When they got into the boat, the wind stopped.

Matt. 14:33 And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son!"

- Anyone who has listened to my teaching for any length of time will know that Peter is my favorite apostle, and in some ways he's my hero
 - I think I'm a lot like Peter...and in a good way
 - Peter was famous for being the apostle known for his shoot first, ask questions later style of ministry
 - And among Peter's many notable moments in the Gospels, this is one of my favorites
 - But it's also one of the most perplexing to me, I struggle to understand what was going on in Peter's head at this point
 - Peter sees Jesus on the water and he hears Jesus say take courage, it is I
 - In Greek, Jesus actually said "I am" which is the calling card of God
 - Now Peter and the rest of the disciples recognize Jesus, but still Peter is worried that this is a trick
 - Remember, they thought they are seeing a ghost
 - So to verify that they are witnessing the real flesh and blood Jesus and not a ghost, Peter contrives this test
 - He tells Jesus to command him to walk to Jesus on the water
 - What were the other disciples thinking at this point? "Oh, that's a good idea Peter...you should try that."
- And I can understand why Peter thinks this is a good idea
 - He's assuming that if he couldn't walk on water, then it would reveal the apparition to be only a ghost and not really Jesus
 - And I'm sure Peter wasn't planning on leaping into the water... I'm sure he planned to test the water carefully with his toes
 - If his foot sank in the water, he wouldn't step out further and the fraud would be exposed...something like that
 - So the point here is to make sure it's truly Jesus before allowing this person to enter the boat
 - But Peter hadn't really thought out where this was going because as soon as he steps on the water and begins moving to Jesus, he freaks out

- Peter sees the wind, meaning he sees the rough seas and probably more importantly, he sees that he's no longer in a boat
- And I think in his mind he's saying to himself "now what?"
- It's like the dog that chases the car...if he ever catches it, then what will he do with it?
- Then we get to the most fascinating part of this account...Peter begins slowly to sink into the water
 - And Jesus rescues Peter by reaching out a hand, chastises him for having little faith and brings Peter back into the boat
 - Now if we don't read this carefully, we would assume that Peter's rising and falling was in proportion to Peter's faith
 - As if Peter's ability to walk on water was a direct reflection of the degree of Peter's faith in Jesus
 - Certainly, it's easy to draw that conclusion, but if we do, it's only because we didn't think about it deeply enough
 - First, how much faith did Peter have in this situation before he stepped into the water?
 - I would say zero faith given that he felt the need to test Jesus' identity
 - So Peter's faith isn't what put him on the water in the first place...ironically it was his doubt in Jesus that put him on the water
 - Then ask yourself this question...when Peter began to sink, was he any less walking on water than when he was completely above the water?
 - When the water was above his ankles or knees or thighs, what was supporting the rest of him?
 - Walking on water is a binary state...either you are or you aren't
 - Or in Yoda's words... do or do not, there is no try
- Peter was walking on water the whole time he was out of the boat, so what changed and why?
 - Well, remember Peter was the one who proposed this extravehicular excursion

- Had Peter said nothing, Jesus would have simply entered the boat and the lesson would have ended there
- In fact, the other Gospel writers say only that...only Matthew mentions this experience with Peter on the water
- But nonetheless, Jesus chose to incorporate this moment into the larger lesson He was teaching the disciples about abiding in Him
 - Remember, back on the mountainside Jesus made the disciples feed the crowd by distributing baskets of food to small groups
 - That method required that the disciples march back up that hill over and over again to renew their supply from Jesus
 - If you were in that crowd that day, you couldn't help but get the point...the guys feeding us depend on Jesus supplying them
- But the disciples missed that point, so now they are in a boat needing Jesus
 - But Peter says to himself, if you are truly Jesus, then command me to do what you do
 - And as he steps on the water, Peter receives the proof he desired...now he knows Jesus is real
- And he starts to walk on water, and once he gains that ability, he begins to operate as if he's on his own again, forgetting who His supply is
 - Peter sees the water whipping up and probably says to himself, now what? Where am I going? What am I doing out here?
 - Just as if a disciple failed to return to Jesus with his empty basket, he was no longer in business...he became useless
 - So are we going to fail if we think that we can serve others apart from Jesus serving us
- So Jesus knows Peter's heart, and so He allows Peter to begin to sink, just a little, just enough to get worried
 - This is where we sometimes get this story wrong...we see Peter's position in the water as if it were a thermometer of his faith
 - As Peter's faith waned, so his power to walk on water waned too

- But that doesn't make sense, because if faith was required to stand on water, he never would have stood in the first place
- And if his faith was a requirement for walking on water, he would have plunged all the way down instantly
- In reality, Jesus let Peter drop slowly so he could experience the lesson Jesus was trying to give the whole boat of men
 - Which is that just as My flock will always be in need of your care, so you will always be in need of Me
 - But if you abide in Me you can perform great works in My name
 - As Jesus says in John 15:

John 15:5 "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing

- So here's what we have learned in observing these men and Jesus
 - Ministry is about being a pipe, a channel of blessing, in which we deliver spiritual supply from Jesus to others
 - Ministry centers on service to others in need, and at times we are the one to serve and other times we are the one in need
 - We gain honor when we render service *and* when we receive service
- And today we learn there is an easy way to learn this lesson and a hard way
 - The easy way to learn about ministry is to engage in the work, serving others as Christ calls us to serve
 - And as we do, we learn important lessons like humility, self-sacrifice, persistence, patience...most of all dependence on Jesus
- But the Lord loves us so much that if we fail to learn this lesson the easy way, He will go the extra mile with us to ensure we learn it the hard way
 - He will put us in a place of need, a trial or difficulty, where we cry out to Jesus and someone comes to our aid

- And maybe we receive that help, but then we tell Jesus “Thanks for the kick start but I got it from here...”
- And then He lets us sink a little to remind us there is never a time “we got it from here”