

The Rev. Cornel Barnett, D.Min.
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
August 7, 2011
Matthew 14:22-33
"Staying Focused"

Stan Waitzfelder, a former captain of the United States Coast Guard, worked for scores of years in New York City's busy harbor and beyond. He was a tall, strong man, tough as nails, in his late eighties when I met him.

He was a member of Calvary Presbyterian Church, Staten Island, where I served as pastor in the early 1990s.

In his retirement, Stan told stories to children at the Snug Harbor Cultural Center and he led a Sunday morning Bible Study at the church.

Stan knew rough seas. It seems ironic that he met his end by climbing to the roof of his house to straighten his weather vane and slipped and landed awkwardly on his back. He lay in pain for days in the hospital and then at his double story home. A bed was brought to the downstairs living room and it was there that I got to know him quite well.

He was on the road to recovery when he collapsed and fell on the sidewalk on his way to the grocery store. It was just an early morning walk. He died of a heart attack.

I used the biblical text just read by Nancy as the text for the homily at his memorial service.

Like Peter in the text Stan walked on water. He walked on water because his life was focused on Jesus. He knew that the way to stay focused in life was to keep his eyes on Jesus. Who knows what this focus did for him when he plied the stormy seas of New York. It probably kept him calm and steady. He knew that when his eyes were averted from Jesus like Peter in the story he would sink.

When I'm on a boat in rough seas, like crossing the English Channel, I keep my eyes on the horizon. It's a steady gaze while my body turns this and that way. It prevents me from getting sick.

Jesus is our steady horizon. He keeps us above water in the stormiest condition. The biblical text reads: "...when he (Peter) noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Staying focused on Jesus in the roughest situations keeps our faith strong. When we are disconnected from our relationship to God in Christ inspired by the Holy Spirit life becomes topsy-turvy. Life is not any easier when we *are* connected but when we are we have a greater chance of pulling through the storm.

How do we stay focused as Christians?

The first guide is given in the story itself. It's what Jesus did before *he* walked on water. He prayed. He prayed during the night and presumably had a good sleep. He prayed when he woke and noticed his disciples struggling with their boat in the turbulent sea.

In his heightened spiritual state, he walks on the water to meet them. Some say he walked on a sand bar and others that he levitated. For many, it's a story like that of Stan Waitzfelder. Jesus was so connected with God that he "walked" on water. Stormy weather was a breeze because of his deep connection with God.

One of the primary reasons to pray is to maintain a conscious connection with God. We pay attention to our relationship with God. All other thoughts save our union with God are set aside. In prayer we speak to God. In meditation we work out issues, problems, relationships, etc. within a God-frame reference, and in contemplation we listen to God in silence. All are ways of staying focused and connected to God.

Without this focus we easily stray into the wilderness or get overwhelmed by the storms of life.

Soren Kierkegaard writes: "Our life always expresses the result of our dominant thoughts." We stay focused when we keep our eyes on Jesus. When we say our prayers in a formal setting (lying on the floor, sitting at a table, kneeling next to a bed, sitting on a chair, etc.) God becomes our dominant thought and this carries us through the day and night.

That's the principle behind the acronym "WWJD: What would Jesus do?" It is a good question to ask in any difficult situation. It presupposes a fair knowledge on what Jesus actually did as recorded in the four gospels and that's why I preach mostly on the stories and sayings of Jesus. Life is a lot more complicated than it was in Jesus' day and our scholarly interpretations of what he did are far more refined. But we keep him in mind and stay focused through the joys, difficulties and storms of life.

I'm in my car a lot, especially my drive to and from work across the San Rafael Richmond Bridge. I have a number of CDs that keep me focused devotionally. One is a recording of the entire New Testament in the New Revised Standard Version, another is famous Bible stories from the both Testaments also in NRSV read by well known readers like Dick Cavett, and another is a commentary on the Gospels by ancient and New Testament Greek professor, Garry Wills.

Besides listening to the news and listening to other educational tapes (which also are foci for prayer) the Bible-related CDs keep my mind and eyes on Jesus: his life, ministry and message. This is something we all can do.

There are many other ways of keeping focused on God in Jesus: Reading and study of the Bible, seminars, retreats, worship, choir, bells, advocacy and just actions in and

through the church, community involvement, church-run classes and events like our Spirit & Work monthly meeting, etc.

Finally, we stay focused when we affirm daily our love of what we believe in. I read online a story by a student at Austin Presbyterian Seminary, Yaira Robinson who writes: "I have a good Muslim friend who once told me that in all the conversations she has with people asking her questions about Islam, questions about everything from basic belief and practice to the role of *jihad* and Sharia law, no one has ever asked her the question she'd most like to answer: 'What do you *love* about Islam?'" "And wow," continues Robinson, "isn't that a great question that we'd all like to answer about our own religion, what you *love* about it? And wouldn't it be fun to hear how your religiously diverse friends, neighbors and co-workers answer that question, too?"

When we love, really love our faith in Jesus, when we feel his love and support, and embrace his challenge to love God and neighbor, everyone in our world no matter how difficult, we know we can deal with the storms and arrows of life. Love is a powerful force, it keeps us in the zone, but in some contexts it might sound Pollyannaish. A good, Christian friend this week had his chicken killed and his cat maimed by marauding dogs owned by irresponsible, non-caring neighbors. After a year of negotiating with his unresponsive neighbor he finally called the police and animal control who are looking into violations by these dog owners. In this case love is holding our neighbor accountable.

Today we celebrate Holy Communion. It's a monthly ritual in this church and it reminds us of our union and communion with Jesus and his life, death and resurrection. It brings us together as a community of faith around the table of sustenance and empowerment. We are fed and strengthened for our journeys of faith. Holy Communion is one of the ways we stay focused and connected with God and each other.

They say surfers walk on water. I know then what it's like to walk on water since I have stood thousands of times on a surfboard in many waters. Just as my surfboard is the mediator between me and the ocean so Jesus is the mediator between me and God.

I wouldn't be in a relationship with God if were not for Jesus and in life its Jesus that keeps me above the water. I can stay a float for a while without my surfboard but I can stay afloat forever with it. I can go through life without Jesus but it goes a lot better with him.

The more we are focused on Jesus the better we are. Our relationship with God in Jesus – our staying focused on Jesus – keeps us walking on the water and helps us cope with any storm. Amen.