

I know a thing or two about culture shock. I lived the first twenty-one years of my life in the city of Charlotte, NC. I went to elementary school there, I went to high school there, I even went to college right around the corner. It was admittedly a somewhat insular life. Then, two days after I walked across the stage of Halton Arena and received the coveted little slip of paper, you know, the one that said that my degree would arrive in the mail, I left the country, for all intents and purposes, for the first time ever. I boarded a plane and flew across the ocean, and after three flights and twenty-four hours of transit, I arrived in Russia, where I would spend the next month on mission work. That first day, as I walked the streets of Moscow and found myself in the middle of Red Square, with the tomb of Lenin on one side, and St. Basil's cathedral on another, I stood wide-eyed with wonder at how far I was from all that was familiar. Then, in case I hadn't quite learned enough about cultural differences, I did the requisite 7 countries in 21 days in Europe, staying in Youth Hostels (which will complete anyone's education.) I saw all manner of things I'd never seen.

Then I returned home, spent all of a week in Charlotte, and packed my bags and moved to New Jersey. That's when the culture shock really hit! Moscow, Paris, Geneva- they were one thing- but *New Jersey*!? Nothing prepared me for living in New Jersey. You see, I only *visited* the other places. I had to *live* in New Jersey. I had to learn to live a different way. My whole geography was mixed up. Washington DC, which had always been north in my world, was suddenly south. Accustomed to the commodious highways of North Carolina, I wasn't ready for the New Jersey Turnlike. (I'm not sure anyone is

ever ready for the NJT.) And I almost hate to mention this, but they thought I had an accent!

Perhaps that is why I have such a soft spot in my heart for the disciples in this story. The wide-eyed southern boy gone north in me can identify with the rag-tag bunch of Jewish peasants who followed Jesus- seeing all manner of strange things- healings, miracles.

Hearing all manner of strange speech- stories about sowers, and seeds, bushel baskets and mustard. And, here their master suggests *the* most outrageous thing they can possibly imagine: let us go across to the other side!

It seems like such an innocent phrase- “let us go across to the other side.” To the uninitiated it looks so innocuous. It wasn’t even a very great distance. It looks to me to be about ten miles or so at the most.

But you know, some distances are greater than the sum of their mileage.

For instance, one only drives a hundred miles from Atlanta to Columbus, but Columbus, GA is a whole lot further south than a hundred miles. That is kind of what going to the other side is like for the disciples. It is a major cultural shift. It is a whole new way of doing things. It is a whole new way of seeing things.

When Jesus suggests going to the other side, it is hardly innocent, and it is most assuredly not innocuous. There is a great deal going on. This line, often ignored because it precedes the wonderful story about the stilling of the storm, may well be the pivot point of Mark’s gospel account. When Jesus suggests going to the other side, it is something akin to whole-scale cultural revolt!

And I suspect that the disciples found themselves as dumbfounded as I was when I waved goodbye to my parents at the Philadelphia airport at the age of twenty-one. This was big- this was really big!

Unknown horrors lay on the other side. From where they stood, they were safe on Jewish turf- they were surrounded by people who did things the way they did things. They lived in a world where they knew how things worked. Everyone's accent sounded the same, and they knew what was expected of them.

Across the water- well, now that's a different story. Things weren't so safe over there. Across the water- there were Gentiles. It reminds me of the old maps of the world that say, "beyond these waters, there be dragons." Well, "beyond these waters, there be Gentiles!"

Now I am sure that the simple word *gentile*, doesn't strike the same fear in our hearts as it did the disciples. I doubt we find anything particularly offensive about Gentiles. Some of my best friends are Gentiles. So am I. So are most of you, I suspect. Unless you are an observant Jew born to a Jewish mother... there may be a few folks who fit that bill here, but the rest of us are gentiles. And given that we are probably all pretty nice folks, we don't quite catch the significance of going to the other side. But the disciples did- and it scared the living daylights out of them!

They were good, observant Jewish men. We can safely assume they'd never done anything like this! There is nothing to indicate to us that they were troublemakers. And yet, here their master, who claimed to love them, and was supposed to know what he was talking about, a Rabbi, was leading them headlong into a veritable cesspool of iniquity. From where they stood, safe on the correct side of the water, Gentiles were about one

step removed from pure evil. They were unclean (read between the lines on that one!) They were known to be irreligious at best and pagan at worst. They were most certainly the kind of person that their mothers warned them about. They didn't worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And horror of horrors- they weren't circumcised on the eighth day- in fact, they weren't circumcised at all. They ate vile, disgusting things that God had clearly forbidden: pork and other stomach turning delicacies like shrimp and lobster. They didn't observe the right religious holidays. They weren't their kind of people. Let's go across to the other side... This was bad news!

So, the disciples stepped onto the boat with faith, to be sure, but also with great fear and trepidation. They set their faces toward this new and frightening journey and then, out of the clear blue sky blows up a storm.

Now you have to realize that the Sea of Galilee isn't that big. It's maybe ten miles wide at it's widest point, and it's not even all that deep either. It would probably take all the water in it to muster one perfect storm-like swell, so this isn't exactly the Andrea Gail scaling a hundred foot wall of water. We are not talking about the Peaquod. There is no Moby Dick circling. But there didn't need to be. Given what lay on the other side and the emotions running high and deep from the uncertainty of doing something not only completely different, but perfectly awful from the perspective of their friends and peers, when the water started coming over the edge of the boat, *panic hit*.

Panic hit, and their fearless leader, the one who got them into this fine mess in the first place? Well, he's fearless enough alright. In fact, he's so fearless that he's curled up like a cat sunning itself- sleeping like a baby on a cushion in the back of the boat.

And this is where my sympathies for these disciples really deepen. If Jesus wanted *me* to go to the other side, to confront all of my own fears and anxieties- if Jesus were telling me to step out onto an uncertain limb into an uncertain future - I'd expect him to at a minimum to have the decency to sit up with me and be nervous- or at least pretend to be. But No! Jesus, their master, their friend, their teacher, is *silent*. The disciples' lives are in turmoil, they are in the midst an existential crisis, and Jesus is in the corner of the boat sawing ZZZZZ's!!!

I'd holler too, and I'm not sure I'd be as nice about it. And I don't have to be too much of a betting man to think some of you might just join in!

Teacher, we are perishing- do you not care!?! We can read between the lines without too much trouble: teacher, we are scared to death- you want us to do things we never dreamed of doing- you want us to accept people who aren't easy to love, you want us to stick our necks out when everyone around is turtling into their shells, and you've left us alone without guidance!

Life is uncertain. Standing up in the face of fear and prejudice and hatred is never-ending hard work. Going out on to an uncertain limb to embrace a new and different future with what feels like new and different rules is frightening. Sometimes we may feel just like those disciples- that Jesus is asleep and doesn't have a care in the world. We might well holler with them, "Wake up and smell the sea-foam- we're going down!"

And do you know the worst part?

They don't even know yet what Jesus knows. They don't yet know that when they do reach the other side, Jesus is going to go on a systematic campaign to ritually defile himself. They don't yet know that he is going to heal Gentiles, and women, and unclean

people, and insane people and lepers. They don't yet know that God is going to give them visions of God's good creation and tell them not to ever call unclean again what God has made clean. They don't know any of that yet. They don't know that he is going to reach out to the likes of you and me and spread his kingdom message through the whole world- reconciling Gentiles- us, that is- to God. These are the first few baby steps, and they are terrified. They just know that the boat that they are in might as well be a stone for all of its seeming ability to remain on top of the water.

And then Jesus hears their cry! He wakes up, gives it a good stretch, yawns, saunters over to the edge of the boat, and says **PEACE, BE STILL!**

And it is. Just like that. Jesus' words bring the winds and waves of which they are so afraid under control. Just like that, the world looks like a safe place. Just like that, God's Word calms the storm.

Don't you wish it were always so easy?

In the face of the Lord of the Universe who can command the wind and seas, and all of the rest of creation, the disciples' fear falls away in sheer amazement.

Don't you wish it were always so easy?

Can I ask you a question? What are you afraid of?

Who or what scares you enough that the very thought of it makes your stomach begin to churn with nausea at the waves of anxiety that rise near the side of your boat?

What would it take to quiet that fear? Could it be that there is a word of hope in this passage for all people?

Many years ago I participated in a service of ordination for a friend of mine. My friend Bill Enright did the charge to the new minister. Generally, charges to ordinands in my

experience have a tendency to be very specific to the ordinand, and the rest of us just sort of overhear. But in this instance, Bill made a statement that electrified me. I think of it every now and then it and haunts me. He quoted German theologian Helmut Thielicke, “every time the preacher ascends the Pulpit, he or she must be prepared to risk heresy.”

Risk heresy! If there is one thing that I am pretty sure of, life teaches us that we should avoid heresy. But isn't that what Jesus is calling the disciples to do as he gathers them into the boat and calls them to go across to the other side? Isn't he calling them to risk heresy as their actions fly in the face of what they have been taught it means to be Jewish, what they have been taught about religious convention? It's the first time that he has pushed them to realize that God's promises aren't just for the few religious elite who do things the way that they have always done things. It's the first time that he has pushed them to realize that using well intended rules to shut people out of the kingdom of God is contrary to God's purpose. He's challenging them to think of life in a whole different way. He is challenging them to think of God in a whole different way.

The problem with this story is that we can't leave it safely in the past. It has a word for us right now in the here and now. The charge that Bill gave to that new ordinand is a charge to us all. He said that the faith that he lives and proclaims isn't worth a pauper's penny if it doesn't give us insight into the issues of life.

The first time that I heard that wonderful Thielicke quote, I knew just exactly where it challenged me. I knew what orthodoxies I held close and sacrosanct. And I knew which heresies I needed to be prepared to risk. That is why it cut me to the quick. But what

I've been learning ever since is that there is a long, established and ever-expanding list of orthodoxies that the Gospel calls us to challenge.

The love that God showed us in Jesus Christ is the perfect love that casts out fear.

That is the love that caused Jesus to step out beyond his comfort zones, and drag the disciples with him. The good news of the Gospel is that God's love is so amazing, so transformative, and so generous to defy easy description.

But we know it when we see it. And the challenge is to share a love that is generous enough, and transformative enough as to risk heresy ourselves.

Stepping out in faith isn't always comfortable- in fact, it is frequently uncomfortable.

Sometimes living the Gospel means we do the very thing that we never thought we'd be able to do. Living the Gospel means we give what we didn't know we could give. We love whom we didn't know we could love.

Sometimes that means challenging what we have been raised to believe. Sometimes, living into the Gospel means challenging what we've grown to believe about just about everything.

The Gospel may challenge our social values. Just like the disciples, we will find that even our religious convictions are challenged. It's not easy, but it is what we are called to do, to step out in faith onto the boat and follow Jesus and share in his ministry, sharing love with the unlovable, the downtrodden, the socially and morally outcast. Sometimes we must step out in faith into an uncertain future to follow the way God has placed before us. Sometimes we are called to risk heresy.

Friends, Jesus still calls us to do and be more than we think that we are able. Jesus still calls us to take his word to heart.

But that's good news! Jesus is in the boat waiting for us. He alone controls the winds and seas that may terrify us. That's good news! Get in the boat. Risk Heresy.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.