

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 26, 2009

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“Jesus a thousand times more terrifying than the killer sea” That’s what Mary Oliver says in responding to the Gospel text that we just heard today, “Jesus a thousand times more terrifying than the killer sea”. And why would he be terrifying to the disciples or terrifying to us? Maybe it’s because we don’t fully comprehend; we don’t fully understand what he embodies; what he calls us to embody; what he calls us to live and how to live; what he tells us about the nature of God and our relationship with God. In this gospel story Jesus is seen walking on the sea and it terrifies the disciples. A strong wind has come up and the sea is rough and the boat is no doubt tossing about. In the Gospel of John, the stories that are told in this Gospel are intended to be signs – signs; they are stories that are about more than what they describe. The signs of Jesus as told in the Gospel of John become like little parables about life – our life, our life in God and I suggest that this story this morning about Jesus walking on the water is such a story about a sign. Now we could debate whether or not we think Jesus actually walked on the water and that would be arguable. But I suggest that what is communicated here through this story is something actually far more meaningful and even important. Rather than this being an incident that happened two thousand years ago to Jesus at some point in time, I suggest that this “sign story” of John’s tells us something about our life and Jesus embodies what it can be for us. Jesus in spite of the tumult and tossing and toppling of the sea waves that Jesus is able to, if you will, walk upon the water. How many of us don’t know what it’s like when circumstances in life toss us to and fro or try to get us off track or we even feel that they might topple us. For how many of us is the undertow of life something that we feel is going to grab us and take us down. Jesus in this story is able to walk upon the water. He is able to walk above – if you will some of those turbulent circumstances so that he can get to the other side, so that he can get to the place where he is going. And I suggest that in this story in John’s Gospel that we are told as Jesus can walk upon the waters of life as difficult and tricky as they might be, and a wind incidentally on the Sea of Galilee can come up like that without warning, that we too can learn how to navigate our lives in such a way that we do not need to be overcome and that the undertow need not get us. Jesus walked upon the water; this is a sign that points beyond that circumstance, to something far more meaningful for us and for our life together. Also in this Gospel we hear about the loaves and fishes. Well, something happened to those loaves. And I suggest that the story about the loaves and fishes is also a story that is intended to be a sign for us. It is about more than the loaves and fishes. It’s intended to tell us something about who Jesus is and I think actually it’s pretty clear that the description in the Gospel is a good example of Biblical high privilege. We get a little taste of it in the Hebrew Scriptures in Second Kings – there were twenty barley loaves and a little bit of corn and it fed a hundred people. That’s not bad! In this text five loaves, two fish and fed five thousand. I suggest that John is trying to communicate something to us about what that feeding is about. It’s pointing to something beyond itself; there’s something about Jesus; there’s something about our life together in God. And where I get my queue for this is where John puts this in his own narrative. The experience

of the feeding of the five thousand, multitudes, many, many, takes place around the Season of Passover; it takes place in the spring. I love that little line in the Gospel that says: "and there was lots of green grass". What did that mean? It was spring near the season of Passover. And what is the Festival of Passover? It is the celebration of how God delivered his people with a mighty hand from Pharaoh's bonding claim in Egypt. God delivered the people from their bondage to a false lord. God delivered the people from their bondage. God is a liberator, delivered them from Egypt where they felt homesick, where life was not as they wanted, where they felt enslaved; all the wrong things and led them through the wilderness to another place of possibility. Now I suggest that anything with which we struggle or that puts us in any kind of bondage -- the antidote is that we have to make a journey of one kind or another. The celebration of Passover reminds us that God delivers us from our bondage and will lead us, guide us in the journey though the wilderness; and wilderness is where we so often find ourselves when we are in transition from one thing to another and if any of you have been in the wilderness, there are not a lot of markers in the wilderness. It's hard to navigate. There's really no place to hide in the wilderness; we're exposed, we're vulnerable. And the Celebration of Passover reminds us that God fed the people in the wilderness; God fed the people; God sustained them in their journey toward which they were going. John in talking about the feeding of the five thousand -- I suggest that that story is a sign about Jesus, that Jesus will feed us in our wilderness, that Jesus is the one that not only calls us, but will sustain us in our journeys and not just us, but multitudes, maybe even nations; that Jesus, if you will, is the bread of our life. Now we know that we cannot live by bread alone and a friend of mine this week told me about some studies with monkeys that if they're given a choice between food and touch that actually over time the monkeys will choose touch. Now we know that we must eat to live. But I think this study shows us that we do not live by bread alone, that we need to be nourished, but we need to be nourished at a deep level; we need to be touched. Later on in this Gospel in this very chapter John will tell us that Jesus is the bread of life, he is the bread for the world, he is the one that can nurture us along our journey and Jesus will say and those who come to me will never hunger or thirst. Now I suggest here that hunger and thirst are also signs; they point beyond what we might first think of as hunger and thirst. And what I encourage you to do today in preparation for coming to our table and I must say we have a little table here in the wilderness; when you come to the table to be nourished, come with your hunger and think about the kind of hunger that gnaws at you even more deeply than the one in the pit of your stomach. What is that hunger for a fuller life or a fuller self? Let that hunger draw you and that thirst. Where in our lives are we so parched, it's almost hard to swallow? It's hard to speak because we are so thirsty. Think about how you hunger and thirst and know that Jesus is coming to you even as Jesus calls you to this table to be fed, to be nourished on your journey. "Jesus a thousand times more terrifying than the killer sea". But why would he frighten us? There's something about what he embodies, what he calls us to experience and know about ourselves and our life in God that truly truly is challenging, but it need not frighten us. I love the prayer that was recorded in the Letter of Ephesians: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth, length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." It's not disputable. We won't debate it like the walking on the water or did he really multiply loaves and fishes. This is a kind

of knowledge, a kind of knowing that surpasses that, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. When you come to this table in the wilderness know that this bread and this wine, they too are signs pointing beyond themselves to the one who can nourish you and feed you in the journey at depths that we all long to be touched. Do not be afraid; "it is I" says Jesus as tender and illuminating and demanding as he always was and clearly much more.