

**Sermon: We Are Not Superheroes**  
**August 9, 2020**  
**Matthew 14.22-33**



*Right then, Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side of the lake while he dismissed the crowds. When he sent them away, he went up onto a mountain by himself to pray. Evening came and he was alone. Meanwhile, the boat, fighting a strong headwind, was being battered by the waves and was already far away from land. Very early in the morning he came to his disciples, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified and said, "It's a ghost!" They were so frightened they screamed. Just then Jesus spoke to them, "Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid." Peter replied, "Lord, if it's you, order me to come to you on the water." And Jesus said, "Come." Then Peter got out of the boat and was walking on the water toward Jesus. But when Peter saw the strong wind, he became frightened. As he began to sink, he shouted, "Lord, rescue me! Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him, saying, "You man of weak faith! Why did you begin to have doubts?" When they got into the boat, the wind settled down. Then those in the boat worshipped Jesus and said, "You must be God's Son!"*

A lot of people love the idea of Superhero Jesus. The Jesus of miraculous healings and magical multiplication of fish and bread and the calming the hurricane and perhaps the most mysterious superheroic feat of all: walking on water. You've seen the image, haven't you? Jesus, pictured sure-footed and upright, balancing on the top of the sea as Peter sinks, waist deep and extending his hand for help. Jesus grabs Peter's hand and saves him from a watery grave, instead retreating into the boat, seemingly calming the raging storm.

But I also know there are many of us today who are a little too practical for this story of water walking. We chock up these stories to embellishments and exaggerations, stories made popular through zealous evangelism and not through scientific truth.

And yet...the image of Jesus walking on water calls to me. A being that has power over the very elements, who finds himself supported by the waves instead of being overcome by them. Having recently spent some time at the ocean's edge, the image of the water walker is unfathomable to me. And it calls me.

It also called to Peter. You'll remember him, one of the disciples who would later betray Jesus three times, who would not quite "get it" all the time, who would be the "rock upon which the church would be built." So, after a lot of working and traveling and ministering with Jesus, following the feeding miracles and healings and so much more, Peter was ready to act, ready to jump out of the boat and into the fray. Peter thought he could be like Jesus, he could walk on water too.

But Jesus wasn't just walking on water on a whim. He put in his work, his self-work, his self-care. Jesus had spent quite a bit of time in the previous few chapters trying to get away and rest. Sometimes we just need to get away, as Tim said last week. In this passage, we see that Jesus stayed behind on land, dismissed the crowds and finally found some quiet time where he could pray. But the disciples did not have the same experience, and we can't ignore their lack of rest in this situation that sometimes is recalled as a ghost story. Perhaps they were seeing apparitions because they needed to rest, too. Perhaps they saw Jesus as a ghost because, as womanist Biblical scholar Dr. Mitzi J. Smith writes, "Perhaps, Jesus looks like a ghost because the Jesus that the disciples left on the other side of the sea looked overworked, fatigued, drab, and unsteady. Perhaps they were not accustomed to seeing Jesus look so rested, in control, and peaceful; thus, they think he is a ghost. Sometimes we are haunted by visions of our better selves. Our better selves are such an improbability for us that to see it, to envision it and what it may take to achieve our better selves is a haunting. We are haunted by better days that seem to escape us. Sometimes we get ourselves in such a rut of not taking care of ourselves, of not exercising, of not sleeping well or barely sleeping, of not eating properly, that to live otherwise haunts us."

Maybe the image of the water walker calls me, calls us, because in some way we DO want Superhero Jesus to exist. We do want superhuman strength and power and command of the elements to be real. We long for something that arises out of our mundane existence and shows us the true real potential of humanity. We are haunted by the unlimited potential we desire, forgetting that we are not God. I think USAmerican culture really likes this, even if I or we still have some questions. USAmerican culture loves the stories of the "young scrappy and hungry" founding fathers, the legendary cowboys, the charismatic Civil Rights leader often pictured standing alone, the one heroic person standing up against a police line. All of the images I have named have their own deeply complex histories, and I absolutely want to encourage you to seek them out, but what they have in common is that they have been whitewashed into a myth of exceptionalism and individualism that has unparalleled power.

We do a disservice to the real lives and real experiences of people who were forced into this narrative or erased to make this narrative work, the human beings enslaved by the founding fathers, the indigenous people whose lands were stolen and given to farmers and cowboys given free range, the strategic team behind Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and the decades of organizers advocating and agitating to be heard. We do a disservice because we do not allow the complicated truth to come out and we choose to see one version of history, one way to to make history: to be a lone ranger, a solitary martyr, a standalone voice.

I recently attended a Militant Nonviolent Civil Disobedience training with the prophetic leader Rev. Osagyefo Sekou, who has been traveling to protest areas ever since the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri began in 2014. (A note about that, please keep watching to see if there are any of these training sessions you can attend!) In the training, as he led the crowd through drills of what to do if there is tear gas, pepper spray, if you are beaten or arrested, he reminded us over and over that if there is a high level of decentralization in a social movement (meaning that there is not a hierarchy of folks in charge) a high level of discipline is required. He shared about how movement organizers strategize, that they are most likely not looking for a fight, that the first rule of nonviolent civil disobedience is “preservation of life so you can live to fight another day.” So when we see a (no doubt powerful) image of one lone person out in front of the crowd, there is a much bigger story, strategy and discipline outside the range of the camera. Also, “movement high” is real: the excitement and adrenaline you get from being part of something big. Rev. Sekou warned to not let your adrenaline get ahead of you, especially white folks, who sometimes feel emboldened to act with that “superhero” feeling pumping through our brains, but whose actions can endanger the collective and render useless the years of strategic organizing by action leaders. Beware the superhuman.

For white folks, the Superhero narrative can be alluring, aided and abetted by skin privilege. White people are more at risk to feel invincible, that nothing can touch us. That feeling only puts the Black, Indigenous and People of Color around us at more risk. White folks can feel over-empowered sometimes, convinced of the right thing to do in each situation, that their opinions are right because they are standard, and put on the defense if those notions are challenged.

This church, and our society as a whole, have been talking recently about white folks “doing their own work,” which is key to creating substantive change and undoing white supremacy. Part of this work for white folks is processing that *no one is a superhero*. Too often white people put ourselves in the

positions of “saviors” rushing in to solve problems that we and our ancestors and our systems created, steamrolling the wisdom and work of people of color. Filipinx writer Jasmine M. Pulido wrote in a powerful article for the *South Seattle Emerald* this past week, “White allies seem to think that once they stand up for Black lives that they are now on the “us” side of “us vs. them.” Hate to break it to you, white folks — that’s not how it works...Real white allies become humble at full recognition of their own complicity. Real white accomplices harbor fear because they know what real risks they will need to take to create a more equitable system. They finally understand the advantages that they’ll have to give up, the ones they shouldn’t have had to begin with, to dismantle white supremacy, and they’re feeling stunned by this dark, loaded reality. When we say “do the work,” they comprehend that “the work” isn’t a fun book club or a few vocal social media posts. The work is hard, grueling, and tiring. It is a long commitment that will very likely outlive their lifetime. The real work happens after the protests end.”<sup>1</sup>

And it’s important to recognize that Black and Indigenous folks and people of color are not superhuman either. Often, white people expect them to be. Think of Therese Patricia Okoumou, the Black woman who climbed the Statue of Liberty on July 4, 2018. She was praised as a hero, sacrificing for liberty for children separated from their families at the border. Or Bree Newsome, who removed the Confederate flag from the statehouse flagpole in South Carolina in 2015. In a powerful article entitled “Black Women Are Not Your Superheroes,” in *Teen Vogue* (yes, *Teen Vogue* has some pretty radical reporting, you should pay attention to them!), queer Black feminist Jenn M. Jackson writes, that Newsome “has continued her activism since [she removed the flag], but she did not act that day because she has a secret, super alter ego, as she expressed online after Okoumou’s action...Newsome tweeted, “[Black women] are on frontline of revolution in America & have been for generations b/c the system of white capitalist patriarchy was literally organized around our enslavement. This is also why we represent the base of progressive mvmt. Y’all erase this reality thinking we exist to save others.” The problem with Black women being considered superheroes is pretty straightforward: They’re not. Black women are human beings...” The author goes on to describe the long history of this, from the mythology that white supremacist culture has drawn around Black, Indigenous and People of Color, and BIPOC women in particular, to Northwestern professor of African-American and gender and sexuality studies Jennifer C. Nash has written that Black women are “multiply marginalized,” and thus “have a unique...contribution to make regarding the issues facing oppressed people. Because of this situatedness, Black women may

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<sup>1</sup><https://southseattleemerald.com/2020/08/04/the-sleep-walking-white-ally/?fbclid=IwAR0aLUhgTOG8esE2HrKE0Yzo266OKzss6k6Hc2OSXxRSjTu4RMhwaUjedMw>

possess skills in navigating the social world from a different vantage point than some other groups. This is not a superpower. This is what surviving oppression looks like.”<sup>2</sup>

So as some among us struggle each day to survive in a society built to entrench white supremacy, let those of us with systemic advantages pick up the work to dismantle the systemic sins that we and our ancestors created. We cannot continue operating in our daily lives treating some people as superhuman with powers that mean they require less rest, fewer resources and are satisfied being Atlas and holding up the world. That is simply not true, and only serves to dig the ditch of oppression deeper and deeper. Physical, mental, spiritual and emotional restoration is important to all, but particularly indispensable for those who have marginalized identities. Each of us must testify every day that all humans are made in the *imago Dei*, the image of God, beloved and unique and worthy of respect, love, safety and a thriving life.

Friends, I have to confess that sometimes I feel like Peter. Sometimes I get one little piece of information, have watched a powerful documentary or read the hottest new book or listened to an interesting show on NPR, and I just bound out of the boat, forsaking the rest of my community and running ahead, showing off to others that “I’m a GOOD white person, I GET it.” Only to find out a few moments later, when I get distracted by something else, that I don’t have anything to prop me up. Robin diAngelo, the author of *White Fragility*, the book many people are studying in the church right now, writes, “White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree that we think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived. None of our energy will go into what we need to be doing for the rest of our lives: engaging in ongoing self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building, and actual antiracist practice. White progressives do indeed uphold and perpetrate racism, but our defensiveness and certitude make it virtually impossible to explain to us how we do so.”

In DiAngelo’s words, I see Peter’s certainty that he also could walk on water, over-emboldened by the appearance of Jesus on the waves. But Peter needed to stop trying to be Jesus. Dr. Mitzi J. Smith says, “Peter was eager to leave his shipmates and to join Jesus, rather than to wait for Jesus to join them in the boat. Sometimes we want our own miracle *at the expense of* others who are in the same boat as us.” Peter thought himself superhuman, exempt from the laws of physics and biology, sure of his footing on

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/black-women-are-not-your-superheroes>

water. He was missing the truth that collective liberation is only possible when we don't forsake our comrades in the boat, when we love each other in our full humanity, fear and all.

Some translations of this Scripture have Jesus saying "what are you afraid of?" instead of "do not be afraid." I like this because Jesus is calling us to examine our fear, question it, get to know it, confront it and move through it...not to be the lone follower stepping out in front, but to be a people who can hold all our fears and anxieties and move through them to do the work of justice. But for me, at least today, this story is not one about faith over fear, or even faith through fear. It is a story that reminds us that Jesus wasn't a superhero and we aren't either. That we can't go around the world treating each other like superhumans, denying the truth that each of us are made in the image of God, but we are not God ourselves. Instead, we must testify to love, as Larry sang this morning. Love that dwells in the human heart and makes itself known through human lives. Love that accompanies us out upon the waters, that fills the spaces between us. Love that tells the truth about our limits and boundaries, that listens with intent to learn and change. Love that reins us into reality and pushes back the apparitions of our perfect selves so that we may live into the messy, beautiful, complicated, beloved and *real* community.

"From the mountains to the valleys  
From the rivers to the sea  
Every hand that reaches out  
Every hand that reaches out to offer peace  
Every simple act of mercy  
Every step to kingdom come  
All the hope in every heart  
Will see what love has done."

Beloved church, treasured friends, let us place our trust in the mystery of Love, that which moves us through the storm together.

See also

[Protest Backlash and the Failings of a Superhero Culture](#), Hollywood Reporter