

## **Stirring Up Trouble**

Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

Following Jesus gets you into trouble. Or rather, trouble seems to follow those who follow Jesus. Don't be so surprised, though--he did try to warn us. When you answer the call to follow and learn from Jesus, that call will put you at odds with the powers of the world. Some people will escape trouble, and others, like poor John the Baptizer, will end up with their head on a platter.

I'm the kind of person who hates being in trouble. Naturally, as a child, I was, on occasion, sent to my room. But all my daddy had to do was look at me and calmly state, "We are disappointed in you," and his words would strike daggers in my heart. I'm not a perfect person, but I try to obey the speed limit, pick up after my dog, and return my shopping cart to the corral at the grocery store. I do not go looking for trouble and, as a result, trouble seldom knocks on my door.

But the older I got, the more I learned that sometimes you have to stir up some trouble in order to achieve justice. The Kingdom of God is more often born out of chaos than on a placid sea. When I was in seminary, the policy at the time was that same-gendered couples were not allowed to be married in the seminary chapel. A good friend of mine petitioned the seminary president to use the space, and her petition was declined. The next day, I found myself with two other colleagues in the office of the President, demanding justice and change to the policy. I had never even been in the president's office before, and I remember how my voice shook when I asked him pointed questions about why he could not allow the wedding of our two same-gendered friends to take place. My colleagues and I knew we were stirring up trouble, and we were not sure of the consequences.

Since that day over a dozen years ago, I have stood in protests, attended rallies, called my elected officials, marched in pride parades, and continued to worship a God that troubles the waters. And before you start thinking that I am a paragon of holy disobedience, the small moments where I have engaged powers and principalities are greatly dwarfed by the moments, when, like Peter, I assumed my faith was not enough. And like the disciples, I am ok with a little bit of miracle and wonder, but grow worry when Jesus starts to go off-script. In last week's gospel reading, we re-visited the feeding of the 5,000 men (more like 10,000 people). The disciples wanted Jesus to send the crowd away before it got too late. I am sure they were anxious that such a large crowd might attract the gaze of the Roman authorities. "Think of what you are doing, Jesus. We don't want trouble."

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But the disciples find themselves in trouble, yet again, as the wind whips their boat and water shakes the vessel from bow to stern. Jesus is off praying by himself. Trouble is brewing, and a storm is shaking the disciple's inmost calm. Even the first sight of Jesus does not inspire calm--they think he's a phantasm! Realizing that it is Jesus, miraculously walking on water, the disciples are soothed, such that Peter, in a show of bravado, wants to walk on the water to meet Jesus. But yet again--he finds himself in trouble, for though the first steps are as those on solid ground, Peter begins sinking down, sinking down.

Cliff Kirkpatrick, former Stated Clerk of the PCUSA remarks, tells the story of hearing Ernest Campbell, a prominent Presbyterian."I will always remember Rev. Campbell's assertion that 'the reason that we seem to lack faith in our time is that we are not doing anything that requires it.' [Kirkpatrick goes on} He was right. The key to faith and fullness of life in Christ is to follow Peter's example and be willing to step out of the comfort and security of the boat and head into the troubled waters of the world to proclaim the love, mercy, and justice of God that we find in Jesus Christ. Being a disciple is a risky and exciting business, but that is exactly what God calls us to do and to be, and God assures us that if we "get out of the boat," we can count on the accompaniment of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

When I think of the great trouble-makers of our era, I recall the Civil Rights leader, Representative John Lewis, who died recently at the age of 80. As an organizer of Freedom Rides and the March on Washington, he got into trouble demonstrating for the cause of equality and justice and was almost killed on the worst day of violence in the South. Representative Lewis spent decades facing down the evils of racism and economic injustice. He knew a thing or two about trouble. Rep. Lewis once remarked, "Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."

Peter gets in good trouble, necessary trouble in order for him to learn that God will never abandon him. "Peter does walk on water—albeit only a few tentative steps—and he does it in a storm. Jesus does not chastise him for attempting to perform the faith amid a storm at sea.

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Bartlett, David L., Taylor, Barbara Brown. Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16) (Kindle Locations 11229-11230). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

Matthew 14: 22-33

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Why? Because God in Christ does not lead us away from the struggles and the tensions of life, but right into the midst of them, armed with the gift of forgiveness."<sup>2</sup>

Good and necessary trouble is essential in the life of the disciple. So go ahead, where you see injustice, or loneliness, shallowness, or meanness, make some waves. The struggles of discipleship are the struggles of a lifetime. Yet though the tempest rounds us roars, we know the truth, it liveth. And so will we, in the arms of the Savior. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Feasting on the Gospels--Matthew, Volume 2: A Feasting on the Word Commentary . Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.