

Walking on Water  
Sunday, February 6, 2022  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snively

I expect you know the story from the Christian New Testament. The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 14 verses 22-33, “Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

“ Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. ‘It’s a ghost,’ they said, and cried out in fear.

“ But Jesus immediately said to them: ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’

“‘Lord, if it’s you,’ Peter replied, ‘tell me to come to you on the water.’

“‘Come,’ he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

“Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

“And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down.

“Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God,’” [Matthew 14:22-33 NIV - Jesus Walks on the Water - Immediately - Bible Gateway](#).

A few of you may also know this story from Buddhist tradition,

“When the world-honored Buddha had left Savatthi Sariputta felt a desire to see the awakened one and to hear him preach. Coming to the river where the water was deep and the current strong, he said to himself: “This stream shall not prevent me. I shall go and see the Blessed One, and he stepped upon the water which was as firm under his feet as a slab of granite. When he arrived at a place in the middle of the stream where the waves were high, Sariputta’s heart gave way, and he began to sink. But rousing his faith and renewing his mental effort, he proceeded as before and reached the other bank.

“The people of the village were astonished to see Sariputta, and they asked how he could cross the stream where there was neither a bridge nor a ferry. Sariputta replied: ‘I lived in ignorance until I heard the voice of the Buddha. As I was anxious to hear the doctrine of salvation, I crossed the river and I walked over its troubled waters because I had faith. Faith, nothing else, enabled me to do so, and now I am here in the bliss of the Master’s presence.’

“The World-honored One added: ‘Sariputta, thou hast spoken well. Faith like thine alone can save the world from the yawning gulf of migration and enable (people) to walk dryshod to the other shore.’ And the Blessed One urged to the villagers the necessity of ever advancing in the conquest of sorrow and of

casting off all shackles so as to cross the river of worldliness and attain deliverance from death. Hearing the words of the Tathagata, the villagers were filled with joy and believing in the doctrines of the Blessed One embraced the five rules and took refuge in his name," [Soulmates: Stories of Jesus and Buddha - Part 2: Walking on Water. - St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church \(staopen.org\)](#).

Now many of us were probably taught as children to understand such stories literally. But the point of both stories is not that someone could walk on water but that faith in either Jesus or the Buddha enabled a disciple to come to them despite obstacles. In the Buddhist story the Buddha explicitly connects the story to his teachings, "And the Blessed One urged to the villagers the necessity of ever advancing in the conquest of sorrow and of casting off all shackles so as to cross the river of worldliness and attain deliverance from death."

Do you know the old gospel hymn, "Blessed Quietness"?

"Joys are flowing like a river,  
Since the Comforter has come;  
He abides with us forever,  
Makes the trusting heart His home.

"Blessed quietness, holy quietness,  
Blest assurance in my soul!  
On the stormy sea, He speaks peace to me,  
And the billows cease to roll."

In the hymn, much more explicitly than in the stories, the rolling sea is a metaphor. The trusting heart will be able to find peace even in the midst of the storms of life. Now I am not going to ask you to follow Jesus or to take refuge in the Buddha, and I won't dissuade you from it either if that is where you find yourself spiritually. What I would like to consider with you today is when doubt keeps us from trying something we consider to be difficult. In the blurb for this service, I used a quote from Suzy Kassem, American writer, film director, philosopher, author, and poet says, "Doubt kills more dreams than failure ever will." Most of life's failures are of the kind that allow us to try again. But if doubt prevents us from making any attempt, we will never know what might have been possible.

What is your walking on water? Do you want to write but all you see are the obstacles? Do you want to stop drinking but all you can imagine is the withdrawal? Do you want to reach out to that estranged friend or relation but all you imagine is rejection? When all we see is the stormy sea we never step out, never find out that maybe we can walk on water.

In the stories Peter and Sariputta begin. They are ready to make the attempt. It is only when they look around at the winds and the waves that they begin to sink. In those stories each calls out to his teacher for help. We do not need to have a teacher we consider to be holy or enlightened in order to ask someone else for help. There is no shame in it. Indeed, it can be a very good strategy. If your dream is to be a good jazz musician then finding a teacher or mentor to help you on the way is a very appropriate step. If you are trying to stop drinking seeking out a support group may be one of the best things you can do to succeed.

There is another story of walking on water that you probably know. Leo Tolstoy's story of the three hermits. Dan Hordewel condenses it like this, "Three Russian monks lived in a faraway island. Nobody

ever went there, but one day their bishop decided to make a pastoral visit. When he arrived, he discovered that the monks didn't even know the Lord's Prayer. So, he spent all his time and energy teaching them the 'Our Father' and then left, satisfied with his pastoral work. But when his ship had left the island and was back in the open sea, he suddenly noticed the three hermits walking on the water – in fact, they were running after the ship! When they reached it they cried, 'Dear Father, we have forgotten the prayer you taught us.' The bishop, overwhelmed by what he was seeing and hearing, said, 'But, dear brothers, how then do you pray?' They answered, 'Well, we just say, 'Dear God, there are three of us and there are three of you, have mercy on us!' The bishop, awestruck by their sanctity and simplicity, said, 'Go back to your island and be at peace.'" [Henri Nouwen and the Three Monks of Tolstoy | Sustainable Traditions](#) and [Three Hermits by Leo Tolstoy \(online-literature.com\)](#). The point again of this story is not to teach the Christian doctrine of the trinity. One of the points is that the hermits were sustained, in part, by the simple fact that they were three. They did not walk across the water alone. They came together.

What is the hard thing that you have stopped even attempting because the wind and waves seem too much? Who is the person or persons you could reach out a hand to to buoy you up and enable you to continue on?

And so far, I have been talking about us as individuals, what choppy seas do we need to walk over as Tri- UU, as Florida, as the United States of America, as the peoples of this earth? These transition years between ministers, COVID, Racism, Climate Change? Those are all fairly daunting.

This earth is the stormy sea we are called to walk upon. When we hear that North Korea has launched another missile, that Texas is in for a second year of unusual cold, that Neo-Nazis have rallied in Orlando, we may begin to sink beneath those waves. It is then that we need to reach out a hand to another who is still walking, and when we regain our own footing then we may be the one who needs to offer our hand to another.

Eboo Patel, founder and executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core, an international youth service leadership organization, tells this story, "I am an American Muslim. I believe in pluralism. In the Holy Quran, God tells us, "I created you into diverse nations and tribes that you may come to know one another." I believe America is humanity's best opportunity to make God's wish that we come to know one another a reality.

"In my office hangs Norman Rockwell's illustration "Freedom of Worship." A Muslim holding a Quran in his hands stands near a Catholic woman fingering her rosary. Other figures have their hands folded in prayer and their eyes filled with piety. They stand shoulder-to-shoulder facing the same direction, comfortable with the presence of one another and yet apart. It is a vivid depiction of a group living in peace with its diversity, yet not exploring it.

"We live in a world where the forces that seek to divide us are strong. To overcome them, we must do more than simply stand next to one another in silence.

"I attended high school in the western suburbs of Chicago. The group I ate lunch with included a Jew, a Mormon, a Hindu, a Catholic, and a Lutheran. We were all devout to a degree, but we almost never talked about religion. Somebody would announce at the table that they couldn't eat a certain kind of

food or any food at all for a period of time. We all knew religion hovered behind this, but nobody ever offered any explanation deeper than "my mom said," and nobody ever asked for one.

"A few years after we graduated, my Jewish friend from the lunchroom reminded me of an experience we both wish had never happened. A group of thugs in our high school had taken to scrawling anti-Semitic slurs on classroom desks and shouting them in the hallway.

I did not confront them. I did not comfort my Jewish friend. Instead I averted my eyes from their bigotry, and I avoided my friend because I couldn't stand to face him.

"My friend told me he feared coming to school those days, and he felt abandoned as he watched his close friends do nothing. Hearing him tell me of his suffering and my complicity is the single most humiliating experience of my life.

"My friend needed more than my silent presence at the lunch table. I realize now that to believe in pluralism means I need the courage to act on it. Action is what separates a belief from an opinion. Beliefs are imprinted through actions.

"In the words of the great American poet Gwendolyn Brooks: 'We are each other's business; we are each other's harvest; we are each other's magnitude and bond.'

"I cannot go back in time and take away the suffering of my Jewish friend, but through action I can prevent it from happening to others," [We Are Each Other's Business | A Chorus of Faiths | Tapestry of Faith | UUA.org](#).

Tolstoy's monks lived in a community of three and as three they walked on water. We live in communities of tens, hundreds, thousands, millions, billions. Only together can we cross our stormy chasms.

The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh said, "People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child—our own two eyes. All is a miracle." We can be the miracle for one another. May it be so.