

A GOOD FOUNDATION
Avoiding Wood, Hay and Straw
WALKING ON WATER BY FAITH

August 9, 2020
9th Sunday after Pentecost
Revision F

Gospel: Matthew 14:22-34

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 3:9-17

Today’s Gospel lesson is used in the West either for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany or the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity. Today’s Epistle lesson used to be used in the West for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, but recently only verses 10, 11, 16 and 17 are used regularly.

Table of Contents

Background for the Church in Corinth	824
Epistle: 1 Corinthians 3:5-17	825
Proving a Man’s Work.....	827
Cleansing Sin by Fire.....	830
Building with Marriage versus Virginity	832
Gospel: Matthew 14:22-34, (Mark 6:45-52, John 6:15-21).....	834

Background for the Church in Corinth

Paul founded the Church in Corinth about 51 AD toward the end of his Second Missionary Journey and stayed there a year and a half (Acts 18:11). Silas was traveling with Paul at the time along with Luke, Timothy and Andronicus, where all but Paul were of the original Seventy. Luke was left behind to oversee the Macedonian Churches¹. Silas was left behind in Corinth² and was later Bishop of Corinth.

Before Paul arrived in Corinth for an extended stay again in late 55 AD, he wrote four letters to Corinth (two of which are lost) and paid the Church one brief visit³. In the interval from 52 to 55 AD, Apollos and the Apostle Peter visited Corinth. Apollos was one of the original Seventy, but must have been back home in Alexandria at the time of Pentecost. He knew only the baptism of John in 53 AD when he came to Ephesus (Acts 18:24-28). Aquila and Priscilla, the overseers Paul left in Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19), straightened Apollos out and also wrote to the Churches in Achaia, (Athens and Corinth) to receive Apollos when he arrived (Acts 18:27). Apollos proceeded to help out by vigorously refuting the Jews publicly showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 18:28). Paul said that he and Apollos are one (1 Corinthians 3:8); that is, of one mind in the work of establishing the Churches.

Copyright © Mark Kern 2007

¹ Note switch in tenses from “we” to “they” and back to “we” in Acts 16:16, 17:1, 20:6.

² Note that we never hear from Silas again traveling with Paul after he arrived in Corinth, Acts 18:5ff.

³ For more details of this, see the Epistle lesson discussion for the 14th Sunday after Pentecost.

The same can be said for the relationship between Paul and Peter. Peter visited Corinth in the early 50's AD. He obviously made a big impression in Corinth since there were factions that had developed by 55 AD (1 Corinthians 1:12) centered around Paul, Apollos, Peter and none of the above (i.e. Christ)!! On Peter's way to Corinth, Paul met him in Macedonia and together they ordained four bishops as shown in Table 1. Thus we can definitely say that Peter and Paul were one in the work also.

Table 1
Bishops Ordained by Peter and Paul c. 50 AD

BISHOP	CHURCH
Olympas	Philippi
Jason	Thessalonica
Silas	Corinth
Herodion	Petras (SW Greece)

From a detailed study of Paul's Missionary Journeys, Paul worked with at least 60 of the original members of the Seventy at some point. Many of them like Luke, Timothy, and Titus traveled with him a lot. In addition, Paul had some contact with Peter, John, Andrew and Philip.

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 3:5-17

Paul described himself, Peter and Apollos as all God's fellow workers (1 Corinthians 3:9). They may have different roles (e.g. Paul planted, Apollos watered: 1 Corinthians 3:6) but they all report to the same God and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor (1 Corinthians 3:8). Paul refers to the Church in Corinth as God's field or tillage and God's building (1 Corinthians 3:9). John Chrysostom pointed out⁴ that the field does not belong to the vinedresser or to the one who cultivates it, but to the householder. The building does not belong to the workman but to the Master. The Church is not Paul's Church or Apollos' Church, but God's Church.

Paul goes on to say that he laid the foundation for the Corinthian Church – which is Jesus Christ – and Peter and Apollos have built on that (2 Corinthians 3:10-11). The building he is speaking of is the Temple of God and that dwells within us (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

Paul spoke to the Corinthians a lot about this. Since life in Corinth was based on such licentiousness – one of the party capitals of the ancient world – Paul spoke to them about coming out from among them, being separate and not touching what is unclean (2 Corinthians 6:16-18). The word “unclean” here is the Greek word *akathartos* and means unclean in the demonic sense. Throughout the Gospels, whenever Jesus, the Twelve or the Seventy cast out demons, the demons are referred to more often as “unclean spirits”, (i.e. *akathartos*) than as demons.

⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, VIII, 6.

Paul also spoke to the Corinthians about what happens if someone ruins (Greek *phtheiro* = to deprave, spoil, ruin) the building (1 Corinthians 3:17). God will ruin (*phtheiro*) him. This happens to a lot of people. It may start out with evil company ruining (*phtheiro*) good habits (1 Corinthians 15:33). Soon, the evil company begins to act like unreasoning animals speaking evil of what they don't understand⁵, and ruining (*phtheiro*) themselves (Jude 10; 2 Peter 2:12). Then, the glory of the un-ruined (*aphthartos*) God gets exchanged for an image made like ruined (*phthartos*) man (Romans 1:23). Revelation speaks of the great harlot who ruined (*phtheiro*) the earth with her fornication (Revelation 19:2). However, creation itself will be delivered from the slavery of this ruin (*phthora*) into glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:21).

On the other hand, Paul also speaks of how one builds on the foundation that he and others laid (1 Corinthians 3:12). This construction is something that everyone participates in. We all have a treasure that is contained in an earthen vessel (2 Corinthians 4:7). The vessel, our human body, is made out of dirt (earth, clay) in order that the power may be of God and not of us. But we can use either the treasure or the vessel to do the building. That is our choice. If we build with the treasure (gold, silver, precious stones), the part that we build will endure; if we build with mere human effort (wood, hay, straw), it won't (1 Corinthians 3:12ff). Paul is not speaking here of something that ruins (*phtheiro*) the building (as in 1 Corinthians 3:17). He is speaking of the quality of each person's work (1 Corinthians 3:13), and the reward for doing it right (1 Corinthians 3:8).

Consider the illustration of the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30): Would a slave who was given five talents and only earned two more receive the same reward as the slave who was given five and earned five more? Or would a slave who was given two talents and earned only one more receive the same reward as the slave who was given two and earned two more? I think not. Paul said, "Each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor" (1 Corinthians 3:8).

This, of course, is not for us to judge. As Paul says a little later (1 Corinthians 4:5), "Therefore judge nothing before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the heart. Then each one's praise will come from God." For example, "well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21).

Basil listed⁶ a number of blessings that we have through the Holy Spirit, including adoption as sons and daughters. Yet these are just the down payment and we see their grace dimly by reflection as if they were already established in fullness. Some people, who have been martyred, have undergone a special test by the Holy Spirit by being baptized in their own blood. "Through the Holy Spirit comes:

1. Our restoration to Paradise,
2. Our ascension into the kingdom of heaven,
3. Our return to the adoption of sons,
4. Our liberty to call God our Father,
5. Our being made partakers of the grace of Christ,

⁵ The Mosaic Law is still useful to us today as a hedge and a boundary on us. If we begin to head down a path that will ultimately ruin us, the Law can be a wake-up call to tell us that something may be wrong.

⁶ Basil, On the Spirit, XIV, 36.

6. Our being called children of light,
7. Our sharing in eternal glory, and
8. Our being brought into a state of all 'fullness of blessing' (Romans 15:29), both in this world and in the world to come.

“Of all the good gifts that are in store for us, by promise, through faith, we behold the reflection of their grace as though they were already present, and we await the full enjoyment. If this is the down payment, how much more is the perfection! If this is the first fruit, how much more is the complete fulfillment! Furthermore, from this too we may apprehend the difference between the grace that comes from the Spirit and the baptism by water: John baptized with water, but our Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. ‘I baptize you with water unto repentance; but he that comes after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire’ (Matthew 3:11). Here He calls the trial at the judgment the baptism of fire, as the apostle says, ‘The fire shall test every man’s work, of what sort it is’. ‘The day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire’ (1 Corinthians 3:13). There have been some who, in their championship of the true Faith, have undergone the death for Christ’s sake, not in mere similitude, but in actual fact. They have needed none of the outward signs of water for their salvation, because they were baptized in their own blood. Thus I write not to disparage the baptism by water, but to overthrow the arguments of those who exalt themselves against the Spirit. They confound things that are distinct from one another, and compare those which admit of no comparison”.

Proving a Man’s Work

So then, how do we do it right? How do we build with gold, silver and precious stones? We don’t have to be an Apostle to begin. Peter, speaking of faith says, “In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold, tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:6-7). The Patriarch Job came through his trials as gold tested or refined by fire (Job 23:8-12)! David spoke of his trials as a process of refining silver by fire (Psalm 66:10-12). Job and David didn’t go looking for the refining. Far more than they would have looked for came to them!

Toward the end of a section where Paul was encouraging the Romans to be sensitive to their conscience and to avoid causing their brothers to stumble over food or feast days, he says, “Whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23). If we are not living by faith, not paying attention to our conscience, not seeing and hearing from God every moment, the things that get done represent mere human effort and not necessarily what is the Lord’s will.

Referring again to the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:28-30), the slave, who buried his talent in the ground and refused to use his treasure, lost what he had and was cast into the outer darkness (i.e. hell). This is not what is referred to as wood, hay and straw (1 Corinthians 3:12). Paul says that those who build with wood, hay and straw will be saved (1 Corinthians 3:15, but that they will suffer loss (of rewards).

There is another illustration of this in one of the accounts of Mary and Martha of Bethany. Martha was anxious and disturbed, running about getting things prepared for Jesus’ visit (Luke

10:40). Jesus, who fasted a lot, would have been quite content with something very simple and had been known to create the food out of nothing when necessary (Matthew 14:13-21; 15:32-39). Mary, on the other hand, sat at Jesus' feet hearing His Word (Luke 10:39). When Martha complained and passed judgment on Mary, Jesus pointed out how anxious Martha was (Luke 10:41). Earlier, Jesus had addressed anxiety like this by using the illustration of the birds and the flowers (Matthew 6:25-34). Mary, Jesus said, had chosen the better part, which shall not be taken from her (Luke 10:42). A few months later, Mary showed what she had learned and anointed Jesus feet and head with very costly oil of nard prior to His burial. (This is the Gospel lesson for Palm Sunday: John 12:1-18, Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9).

Who was living by faith? Obviously Mary! Martha was trying to please God! But it wasn't by faith and therefore it was wood, hay or straw. Did Martha lose her salvation? No! After Pentecost, she and her sister Mary went to help evangelize Gaul (modern France) probably with their friend and neighbor Simon (Mark 14:3, at whose house Mary anointed Jesus) who was ordained Bishop of Gaul.

Thus, building the Temple of God with gold, silver, and precious stones is something that God's fellow workers do by faith. It may be something very simple such as sitting at Jesus' feet or partaking in faith of the Lord's Supper. Many people vastly under-estimate the value or treasure of simply partaking in faith of the Lord's Supper. Ignatius of Antioch referred⁷ to the Lord's Supper as the Medicine of immortality. On the other hand, wood, hay and straw are things that are not done in faith even if they are well meant. The way we know the difference is to hear the Lord's voice in our own heart.

Jerome stated⁸ that there is a difference between one degree of salvation and another, as is illustrated by the quality of the work: gold, silver, precious stones, which are proven by fire.

John Chrysostom stated⁹ that there are many possible ways to build, depending on our own character and ability in spiritual matters. Some ways require more effort and dedication, and not everyone is able to follow in that path. The point is to choose the path to the Kingdom of God that we can endure.

“Our Master knew that if He carved out only one road for us, many would shrink from it, so He carved out diverse roads. You can't enter the kingdom; it may be, by the way of virginity. Then enter it by way of single marriage. Can you not enter it by one marriage? Perchance you may by means of a second marriage. You can't enter by the way of continence; enter then by the way of almsgiving. Or if you can't enter by the way of almsgiving, then try the way of fasting”.

“Therefore the prophet spoke not of a garment of gold, but of one woven with gold (Psalm 45:13). It is of silk, or purple, or gold. You can't be a golden part? Then be a silken one. I accept you, if only you are clothed in My garment. Therefore Paul said, ‘If any man builds upon this foundation, gold, silver, previous stones’ (1 Corinthians 3:12). You can't be the precious stone? Then be the gold. You can't be the gold? Then be the silver, if only you are resting upon the

⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, Ephesians 19.

⁸ Jerome, Treatise Against Jovinianus, II, 19, 22.

⁹ John Chrysostom, Two Homilies on Eutropius, II, 15.

foundation. And again elsewhere, ‘There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars’ (1 Corinthians 15:41). You can’t be a sun? Then be a moon. You can’t be a moon? Then be a star. You can’t be a large star? Be content to be a little one if only you are in the Heaven. You can’t be a virgin? Then live continently in the married state, only abiding in the Church. You can’t be without possessions? Then give alms, only abiding in the Church, only wearing the proper garment, only submitting to the queen¹⁰. The garment is woven with gold, embroidered and fringed. I do not bar the way against you; for your virtue has rendered the king’s dispensation easy. ‘Clothed in vesture woven with gold’ (Psalm 45:13). Unfold, if you please, the deep meaning of the expression “vesture” used here, and fix your eyes upon this garment woven with gold. For here indeed some live celibate, others live in an honorable estate of matrimony being not much inferior to them. Some have married once; others are widows in the flower of their age. For what purpose is a paradise? And why does it have a variety of diverse flowers, and trees, and many pearls? There are many stars, but only one sun: there are many ways of living, but only one paradise; there are many temples (i.e. us), but only one mother of them all (i.e. the Church). There is the body, the eye, the finger; but all these make up but one man”.

John Cassian added¹¹ that there are implications to our being called the Temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwelling in us (1 Corinthians 6:19). The rafters of the House of God were made from cypress and the beams were made from cedar (Song of Solomon 1:17 LXX). This implies that the House of God is made from materials that are fragrant and not liable to rot. As we build on the good foundation, our efforts should be “fragrant” to those around us, and there should be no corruption present.

John Chrysostom stated¹² that if one continually needs teaching on the elementary aspects of the Faith, one does not have the foundation yet. If one has been catechized and baptized, but one’s life is not in conformity with his faith, he is still a babe and is still laying a foundation.

“‘The Beginning’ is nothing else than this: when one does not have strict control of his life. For as it is necessary to teach the letters first to someone who is beginning to study grammar, so also must the Christian know these things accurately, and have no doubt concerning them. Should he again have need of teaching on this, he has not established the foundation yet. For one who is firmly grounded ought to be fixed and to stand steady, and not be moved about. But if one who has been catechized and baptized is going ten years afterwards to hear again about the Faith, and that we ought to ‘believe’ in ‘the resurrection of the dead’, he does not yet have the foundation, he is still seeking the beginning of the Christian Faith¹³. For that the Faith is the foundation, and the rest the building, hear the Apostle saying, ‘I have laid the foundation and another builds thereon’ (1 Corinthians 3:10). ‘If any man build upon this foundation, gold, silver, precious

¹⁰ That is, the Church.

¹¹ John Cassian, Twelve Books on the Institutes of the Coenobia, IX, 3.

¹² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, IX, 2-3.

¹³ Many people, who are nominal Christians, may be in this position today, and they may be unaware of it.

stones, wood, hay, stubble' (1 Corinthians 3:12). 'Not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works'" (Hebrews 6:1).

"But what does it mean, 'let us go on to perfection?' (Hebrews 6:1) Let us proceed even to the very roof; that is, let us have the best life. In the case of the letters, the alpha is used as part of the whole and as the foundation of the whole building. So also full assurance concerning the Faith involves purity of life! Without this it is not possible to be a Christian, as without foundations there can be no building; or can one have skill in literature without knowing the letters of the alphabet. Still if one should be always going round about the letters, or if one is always trying to learn about the foundation, not about the building, he will never gain anything".

"Do not think that the Faith is lower in value, if it is called elementary; for its elementary character is its power. Paul says, 'Every one that uses milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe' (Hebrews 5:13); yet it is not the elementary character which he calls 'milk'. To be still doubting is a sign of a feeble mind, and needing much teaching. For these are wholesome doctrines. For we call him 'a perfect man', i.e. 'of full age', who with the faith has a right life. But if anyone has faith, yet does evil, and is in doubt concerning the Faith itself, and brings disgrace on the doctrine, him we shall with reason call 'a babe', in that he has gone back again to the beginning. Even if we have been ten thousand years in the faith, yet are not firm in it, we are babes. Similarly when we don't live a life in conformity with the Faith; we are still laying a foundation.

Cleansing Sin by Fire

There is also a cleansing aspect to the "fire", and the fire refers to things both in this life and at the Last Judgment. John Chrysostom stated¹⁴ that Paul was beginning here to build a case for his statements later regarding the immoral man who had his father's wife (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). One meaning, then, of the passing through fire refers to Judgment Day where the things that we have done will be clarified as to their intent.

"Now his meaning is this: If any man has a rotten life with a right faith, his faith shall not shelter him from punishment, his work being burned up. The phrase 'shall be burned up' means 'shall not endure the violence of the fire.' But just as if a man having golden armor on were to pass through a river of fire (Daniel 7:10 LXX), he comes away from crossing it all the brighter. But if he were to pass through it with hay, so far from profiting, he destroys himself besides. So also is the case with regard to men's works. For he does not say this as if he were discoursing on material things being burned up, but with a view toward making their fear more intense, and of showing 'He shall suffer loss, but he himself shall be saved, but so as by fire'".

Ambrose of Milan linked¹⁵ the fire that consumed the OT sacrifices with the fire that cleanses us from sin. He described the water of Baptism and the fire of cleansing as going together

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Corinthians, IX, 5.

¹⁵ Ambrose of Milan, Three Books on the Duties of the Clergy, III, xviii, 102-107.

in cleansing us, for we are the sacrifice on the altar. This fire is a spiritual grace that burns out our sins, just as through the water of Baptism it cleanses us.

“The Lord Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire, as John the Baptist said (Matthew 3:11). Rightly was the sacrifice consumed, because it was for sin. But that fire was a type of the Holy Spirit, Who was to come down after the Lord’s ascension, and forgive the sins of all, and Who like fire inflames the mind and faithful heart. Jeremiah, after receiving the Spirit, said, ‘It became in my heart as a burning fire, flaming in my bones, and I am weakened and cannot bear it’ (Jeremiah 20:9 LXX). Also, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles and the others, we read that tongues as of fire were distributed among them (Acts 2:3). The soul of each one was so uplifted by His influence that people thought they were full of new wine (Acts 2:13), who instead had received the gift of a diversity of tongues”.

“Fire thus became water and water called forth fire; spiritual grace burns out our sins through fire, and through water cleanses them. Sin is washed away and it is burned away. Paul said, ‘The fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is’ (1 Corinthians 3:13). And further on, ‘If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire’” (1 Corinthians 3:15).

“Sins are burned out by means of fire, and this is in truth the sacred fire which, as a type of the future remission of sins, came down upon the sacrifice”.

“This fire is hidden in the time of captivity¹⁶, during which sin reigns, but in the time of liberty it is brought out. Though it is changed into the appearance of water, yet it preserves its nature as fire so as to consume the sacrifice. Do not wonder when you read that God the Father said, ‘I am a consuming fire’ (Deuteronomy 4:24). And again, ‘They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living water’ (Jeremiah 2:13). The Lord Jesus, too, like a fire inflamed the hearts of those who heard Him, and like a fount of waters cooled them. He Himself said in His Gospel that He came to send fire on the earth (Luke 12:49) and to supply living waters to those who thirst” (John 7:37-38).

“In the time of Elijah, fire came down when he challenged the prophets of Baal to light up the altar without fire. When the false prophets could not do so, he poured water three times over his victim, so that the water ran round about the altar; then he cried out and the fire fell from the Lord from heaven and consumed the burnt-offering” (1 Kings 18:30-38).

“You are that victim. Contemplate in silence each single point. The breath of the Holy Spirit descends on you; He seems to burn you when He consumes your sins. The sacrifice, which was consumed in the time of Moses, was a sacrifice for sin, therefore Moses said, ‘Because the sacrifice for sin was not to be eaten, it was consumed’ (2 Maccabees 2:11 LXX). Does it not seem to be consumed for you when in the sacrament of baptism the whole outer man perishes? ‘Our old man is crucified’ (Romans 6:6), the Apostle exclaims. As the example of the fathers teaches us, the Egyptian (i.e. sin) is swallowed up -- the Hebrew arises renewed by the Holy Spirit, as he crossed the Red Sea dry shod -- where our fathers were baptized in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Corinthians 10:1-2).

¹⁶ During the Captivity, no sacrifice was possible, because sacrifices could only be offered in Jerusalem. This is also the case when we are held captive by sins.

Cyprian of Carthage stated¹⁷ that there are different aspects to how the “fire” can work. “It is one thing to be tortured by long suffering for sins, to be cleansed and long purged by fire. It is another thing to have purged all sins by suffering. It is one thing to be in suspense till the sentence of God at the Day of Judgment; it is another to be at once crowned by the Lord at one’s martyrdom.

Building with Marriage versus Virginit

Beginning in the 1st century, there has been a strong influence of virginity or celibacy on the Church. All of the Twelve Apostles embraced this, including those that were married. By giving up the things of this world for the sake of the Kingdom of God (Matthew 19:29), they left behind the pleasures of the flesh as well as the material aspects of this life. In the 1st Century among the Christians, the influence of celibacy as the preferable state was so strong that Paul had to write to the Corinthians to tell them that they did not sin if they married (1 Corinthians 7:28). Even some of the heretics held celibacy in high regard.

In the light of this, Jerome interpreted¹⁸ the building on the good foundation with gold as referring to celibacy and the building with silver as referring to honorable marriage. Other heretical Greek and Latin writers, he said, referred the hundred-fold yield (Matthew 13:8) to martyrs, the sixty-fold to virgins, and the thirty-fold to widows. Jerome felt that they were overstating the benefits of celibacy. Jerome interpreted the hundredfold as referring to virginity, the sixty-fold as referring to widows and widowers, and the thirty-fold as referring to honorable marriage.

“We are not disciples of Marcion¹⁹ or of Manichaeus²⁰, to detract from marriage. Nor are we deceived by the error of Tatian²¹, into supposing that all cohabitation is unclean. We know that in a large house there are vessels not only of silver and of gold, but of wood also and of earth (2 Timothy 2:20). We know, too, that on the foundation of Christ, which Paul the master builder has laid, some build up gold, silver, and precious stones; others, on the contrary, hay, wood, and stubble (1 Corinthians 3:10-12). We are not ignorant that ‘marriage is honorable and the bed undefiled’ (Hebrews 13:4). We have read the first decree of God: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth’ (Genesis 1:28). But while we allow marriage, we prefer virginity, which springs from it²². Gold is more precious than silver, but is silver on that account less valuable? Is it an insult to a tree to prefer its apples to its roots or its leaves? Is it an injury to grain to put the ear before the stalk and the blade? As apples come from the tree and grain from the straw, so virginity comes from wedlock. Yields of a hundredfold, of sixty-fold, and of thirty-fold (Matthew 13:8) may all come from one soil and from one sowing. The yield thirty-fold signifies wedlock, suggestive as it is of a loving gentle kiss or embracing, aptly represents the relation of husband and wife. The yield sixty-fold refers to widows

¹⁷ Cyprian, *Epistles*, LI, 20.

¹⁸ Jerome, *Letter to Pammachius*, XLVIII, 2-3.

¹⁹ Marcion was a heretic presbyter of the 2nd century who rejected the Old Testament.

²⁰ Manichaeus (also known as Manes) was a heretic teacher of the 3rd Century who taught a complicated system of theology that portrayed Christians as heretics.

²¹ Tatian was a 2nd century convert of Justin Martyr, who apostatized.

²² That is, a child is born to a married couple and the child dedicates his (her) life to celibacy.

who are placed in a position of distress and tribulation. For, as it is extremely trying when one has once tasted pleasure to abstain from its enticements, so the reward of doing this is proportionately greater. Moreover, a hundred-fold signifies the crown of virginity.”

Gregory of Nyssa also referred²³ to celibacy as a precious thing that can be built on the good foundation. However, one’s whole life must harmonize with this perfect note or it becomes pearls that are trampled by swine.

“The Gospel implies that he who undertakes the building of a tower, but spends all his labor upon the foundations without ever reaching the completion, is worthy of ridicule (Luke 14:28-30). We learn from the Parable of the Tower to strive to come to the finish of every purpose, accomplishing the work of God in all the multiform structures of His commandments. One stone is no more the whole edifice of the Tower, than one commandment kept will raise the soul’s perfection to the required height. The foundation must by all means first be laid, but over it, the edifice of gold and precious gems must be built (1 Corinthians 3:12). So is the doing of the commandment put by the Prophet who cries, ‘I have loved Your commandment more than gold and many a precious stone’ (Psalm 119:127 LXX). Let the virtuous life have for its substructure the love of virginity, but upon this let every result of virtue be reared. Virginity can be a vastly precious thing and can have a divine look. Yet, if the whole life does not harmonize with this perfect note, and it is marred by the succeeding discord of the soul, this thing becomes ‘the jewel of gold in the swine’s snout’ (Proverbs 11:22), or ‘the pearl that is trampled under the swine’s feet’” (Matthew 7:6).

Thus in speaking to the Corinthians, Paul was addressing many who were weak in the Faith, and who were still laying a foundation for their life. They tolerated sin in the Corinthians Church, and many didn’t have the discernment of men who were strong in the Faith. Paul showed his love for them in treating them gently, but he also warned them that they could easily ruin themselves.

When it came to building on the foundation he laid, Paul kept coming back time and again to their understanding the Holy Spirit working in their midst. This would build with the gold, silver and precious stones. But he wanted them to know that even if they didn’t do this, but built with wood, hay or straw, they would not lose their salvation for so doing.

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, “On Virginity”, Ascetic and Moral Works, II, 17.

WALKING ON WATER BY FAITH

August 18, 2019
9th Sunday after Pentecost
Revision F

Gospel: Matthew 14:22-34, (Mark 6:45-52, John 6:15-21)

The setting of the Gospel lesson is 29 AD, just following Passover (March-April), or exactly one year before the crucifixion (John 6:4). The Twelve had just been sent out two by two, and when they returned, Jesus took them by boat to a deserted place belonging to the city of Bethsaida (Luke 9:10) for a debriefing. Bethsaida was the hometown of Peter, Andrew and Philip (John 1:44). However, the multitudes saw where they were going and hurried there on foot from all the nearby cities (Matthew 14:13, Mark 6:32-33). This was possible since Capernaum and Bethsaida are both at the Northern end of the Sea of Galilee and thus the boat ride wasn't very far from land. When Jesus and the Twelve arrived, Jesus taught the multitude and then fed 5,000 of them (plus women and children, Matthew 14:21).

The men of the 5,000, when they had seen the sign Jesus did, said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14, Deuteronomy 18:15-19). To avoid being taken by force to be made king, Jesus dismissed the crowd and went to the nearby mountain to pray (Matthew 14:22-23). Jesus sent the Twelve on ahead back to Capernaum in the boat (Matthew 14:22, Mark 6:45, John 6:17) at about sundown.

When Matthew said Jesus made His disciples get into the boat (Matthew 14:22) he was undoubtedly referring to the Twelve, who He came there with. As Jesus went up a mountain nearby (there are mountains all around the area), to pray, the disciples began rowing across the Sea of Galilee. At the fourth watch²⁴ of the night (Matthew 14:25), the Twelve had rowed about 3-4 miles (John 6:19) and were rowing into a severe head wind (Matthew 14:24, John 6:18). Since the distance from Capernaum to the spot near Bethsaida, where Jesus fed the 5000, is less than 3 miles by boat, the wind had evidently blown them off course, where the Sea of Galilee is well known for sudden and severe storms. The boat was one of their fishing boats and, with twelve people in it, was fully loaded. If they started about nightfall (John 6:17) and were still rowing 6 to 9 hours later without making much headway, they were tired, probably bailing water as fast as they could, and were generally in desperate straits.

While they were straining at the oars, Jesus came walking on the water (Matthew 14:25-26) and would have continued past them (Mark 6:48). The Twelve thought they were seeing a ghost (Greek *phantasma* meaning phantom) and cried out in fear (Matthew 14:26). Instead of continuing on, Jesus stopped and said, "Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid" (Matthew 14:27). Peter responded by challenging the "phantom", "If it is You, command me to come to You on the water" (Matthew 14:28). Peter's great love for Christ was illustrated by his desire to walk on the water of the stormy Sea of Galilee. Peter did not ask Jesus to request this, but to command this! The Lord said, "Come!" and Peter began to walk on the water. But when

Copyright © Mark Kern 2007

²⁴ The 4th Watch was between 3 AM and 6 AM.

he saw that the wind was very forceful as he went up and down on top of the “roller-coaster” of the churning swells, he began to sink and cried out to the Lord to save him (Matthew 14:30). Peter was a good swimmer²⁵; this was necessary as part of his livelihood in retrieving some of the nets he used as a fisherman. However, swimming in deep water during hurricane-force winds is another matter.

Jesus immediately caught Peter and chastised him (Matthew 14:31) for doubting, for the hearts of the Twelve were hardened and they had not understood about the loaves that fed the 5000 (Mark 6:52). After Jesus caught Peter, they both walked on the water back to the boat. When they got into the boat, the wind ceased immediately (Matthew 14:32) and they found themselves immediately at land where they were going (John 6:21).

Cyril of Jerusalem stated²⁶ that Peter’s faith supported him as he walked on the waters. When his faith relaxed, he sank. But he recovered and walked back to the boat with Jesus.

“If we keep this faith, we shall be adorned with all kinds of virtues. So great is the strength of faith, as even to buoy men up in walking on the sea. Peter was a man like us, made up of flesh and blood, and living upon like food. But when Jesus said, ‘Come’ (Matthew 14:29), he believed, and walked upon the waters, and found his faith safer upon the waters than any ground; and his heavy body was upheld by the buoyancy of his faith. But though he had safe footing over the water as long as he believed, yet when he doubted, at once he began to sink. His faith gradually relaxed, and his body also was drawn down with it. When He saw his distress, Jesus, who remedies the distresses of our souls, said, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’ (Matthew 14:31) And being nerved again by Him who grasped his right hand, he had no sooner recovered his faith, than, led by the hand of the Master, he resumed the same walking upon the waters. For this the Gospel indirectly mentioned, saying, ‘When they had gone up into the boat’ (Matthew 14:32). For it doesn’t say that Peter swam across and went up, but lets us understand that, after returning the same distance that he went to meet Jesus, he went up again into the boat”.

This was the second time that Jesus exhibited mastery over the wind and the waves. The first time occurred just a few months previous as Jesus and the Twelve crossed the Sea of Galilee to heal the Gadarene demoniacs (Matthew 8:23-27). On that occasion, the Twelve responded by marveling, “Who can this be that even the winds and the sea obey Him?” This time their reaction was to worship Him saying, “Truly You are the Son of God!” (Matthew 14:33).

John Chrysostom stated²⁷ that Peter leaped forward to walk on the water out of love for Christ, but also displaying faith. Peter rejoiced not so much in walking on the water, but in coming to Christ. If Christ had said, “No” to Peter’s request to walk on the water, Peter may have contradicted Him again. Once Peter got out on the water, he began to get dizzy from the surf and the wind, and became afraid. After he had prevailed over the greater (the waves), he began to suffer from the lesser (the wind), for such a thing is human nature; often doing greater things, it

²⁵ In John 21:7, Peter was naked as he worked, most likely diving down to retrieve nets.

²⁶ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, V, 7.

²⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, L, 2.

exposes itself in the lesser. Following this adventure, the Twelve did not approach Him as before, dragging Him into their houses, and seeking a touch of His hand, and directions from Him in words. But in a far higher strain, and with more self-denial, and with more abundant faith did they relate to Him.

John Chrysostom also pointed out²⁸ that Jesus did not show Himself walking on the sea to the multitudes because the miracle was too great to suit their infirmity. Sometimes the greatest miracles are done very privately.

Ambrose stated²⁹ that it is the Lord's will that His disciples should possess great powers, but that there is no power of man that is exercised in these things. All is the power of God. While He could have done everything Himself, He purposely set His disciples up to do it themselves through grace.

“It is the will of the Lord that His disciples should possess great powers; it is His will that the same things which He did when on earth should be done in His Name by His servants. For He said, ‘You shall do greater things than these’ (John 14:12). He gave them power to raise the dead. And whereas He could Himself have restored to Saul the use of his sight, He nevertheless sent him to His disciple Ananias that, by his blessing, Saul's eyes might be restored. He commanded Peter to walk with Himself on the sea, and because he faltered He blamed him for lessening the grace given him, by the weakness of his faith. He Who Himself was the light of the world granted to His disciples to be the light of the world through grace. And because He purposed to descend from heaven and to ascend there again, He took up Elijah into heaven to restore him again to earth at the time, which should please Him. And being baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire, He foreshadowed the Sacrament of Baptism at the hands of John”.

“He gave all gifts to His disciples, of whom He said, ‘In My Name they shall cast out demons; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they shall drink anything deadly, it shall by no means hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover’ (Mark 16:17-18). So, then, He gave them all things, but there is no power of man exercised in these things, in which the grace of the divine gift operates”.

Jerome addressed³⁰ the heretics of his day, whose teachings on this matter originated³¹ with the arch heretic Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24). They had claimed that Christ's body was spiritual and aerial, and therefore could pass through closed doors and walk on water. They ignored Thomas touching His side (John 20:25), His eating fish and honeycomb (Luke 24:42), etc. The Lord insisted that He continued to have flesh and bones after the Resurrection; these miracles must be attributed to the power of God and not to a change of nature.

“If from our Lord's entering in through closed doors, you strive to prove that His body was spiritual and aerial, He must have had this spiritual body even before He suffered. Since -- contrary to the nature of heavy bodies -- He was able to walk

²⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XLIII, 1.

²⁹ Ambrose, Two Books Concerning Repentance, VIII, 34.

³⁰ Jerome, Letter to Eustochium, CVIII, 24.

³¹ For details, see Mark Kern, Simon Magus the Heresiarch, St Athanasius Press, 2002.

upon the sea. The apostle Peter also must be believed to have had a spiritual body for he also walked upon the waters with buoyant step (Matthew 14:29). The true explanation is that when anything is done against nature, it is a manifestation of God's might and power. In these great signs our attention is asked not to a change in nature but to the almighty power of God. He who by faith had walked on water began to sink for the lack of it and would have done so had not the Lord lifted him up with the reproving words, 'O you of little faith wherefore did you doubt?' (Matthew 14:31) I wonder that you can display such effrontery when the Lord Himself said, 'Reach here your finger, and behold my hands; and reach here your hand and thrust it into my side; and be not faithless but believing' (John 20:27). And in another place, 'Behold my hands and my feet that it is I myself; handle me and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have. And when he had thus spoken he showed them his hands and his feet' (Luke 24:39). You hear Him speak of bones and flesh, of feet and hands; and yet you want to palm off on me the bubbles and airy nothings of which the stoics rave!"

Jerome also mentioned³² that we will have real bodies at the Resurrection similar to our present bodies, but glorified. The implication is that we will be able to do the things then that Jesus and Peter did, like passing through solid walls and walking on water.

"The substance of our resurrected bodies will certainly be the same as now, though of higher glory. For the Savior, after His descent into hell, had the selfsame body in which He was crucified that He showed the disciples the marks of the nails in His hands and the wound in His side. Moreover, if we deny the identity of His body because He entered though the doors were shut, and this is not a property of human bodies, we must deny also that Peter and the Lord had real bodies because they walked upon the water, which is contrary to nature. 'In the resurrection of the dead they will neither marry nor be given in marriage, but will be like the angels' (Luke 20:35-36). What others will hereafter be in heaven, virgins begin to be on earth. If likeness to the angels is promised us (and there is no difference of sex among the angels), we shall either be of no sex as are the angels, or though we rise from the dead in our own sex, we shall not perform the functions of sex."

Thus in this Gospel lesson, these Twelve Apostles are being taught to live by faith. They did not understand right away the miracle of the breaking of the bread for the 5,000 – which is an image of the Lord's Supper, which is also expressed as the Bread³³ of Life (John 6). Their hearts were a little hard at this point (Mark 6:52), but they were beginning to soften. From Peter's attempt to walk on the water and Jesus' reply, "O you of little faith" we can see that it is by faith that we are members of God's household and that anything that is not of faith is sin (Romans 14:23). We are not all called to walk on water by faith, although some, like Mary of Egypt³⁴ did so regularly. We are all called to sit at Jesus feet like Mary of Bethany (Lazarus' sister) and hear what He says, and, by faith, obey His voice and do what He says.

³² Jerome, *Treatise Against Jovinianus*, I, 36.

³³ This is covered in detail in the Gospel lesson for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost.

³⁴ Mary of Egypt is remembered on the 5th Sunday of Lent