

Faith that Overcomes Our Fears

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Renewing Your Spiritual Passion Series

Matthew 14:22-31

Since the World Trade Center attack, we Americans have been living with a level of fear that has really been unknown in our country in the last 60 years, since Pearl Harbor. Other people in the world, Israel comes to mind, have lived in a state of fear, eyeing people with suspicion, looking at every package that may be placed by a park bench or by a mailbox. But we Americans have been relatively free from that level of paranoia and suspicion until now.

Gun sales have skyrocketed in the last 3½ weeks. So has the sale of gas masks and survival kits. I heard a report about doctors hoarding antibiotics to ward off potential biological warfare. Everywhere you go Americans are afraid.

We've become afraid to travel, especially by air. There is a deeply held belief that we need to beef up security not only in our airports, but by power stations, by nuclear plants, by dams, by water treatment facilities. We don't know when or if the next attack is going to come.

The urban legend rumor mill has been spreading all kinds of horrific scenarios, spinning these almost science fiction tales. The latest one I heard was that the terrorists had soaked thousands of tiny sponges with anthrax and were picking Americans at random to mail these to in little envelopes. Fear. After the latest Greyhound Bus attack, folks are fearful to travel in any form of transportation – whether by bus, train or plane. In New York City we literally are at ground zero of fear in America.

The New York Times recently had a front page article titled “New Yorkers Facing Fears with Prayers and Parachutes.” It talked about how New Yorkers are coping with their fears. Some are turning to God and are praying. Others confess that they don't know what to do. Many can't sleep. Individuals confess to being afraid of going on the subway. Some are walking 60 blocks because they fear a terrorist attack on the subways. One man said that he normally walks through Grand Central Station on his way to work. It was a shortcut. Now, he avoids large public buildings.

People in New York are shunning the Empire State Building, the United Nations, and Trump Tower – any structure that seems symbolically important enough to warrant a terrorist attack. One New Yorker said, “I can't even look downtown.” In fact, he said that he can't walk to the end of his street in Jersey City because it gives an unimpeded view across the Hudson River of where the Trade Center once stood.

People are buying bullet proof vests all over New York City. Even parachutes, thinking they may need some help if they ever have to jump out of a high window. Sirens are making people skittish. That was always part of the background noise of New York City. One man said that he literally jumped out of his seat when the movie theater he was attending began shaking. He realized after a few moments that it was just a subway passing by.

Folks are skittish. They are jumpy. They are like cats on a hot tin roof. They are very nervous. There has been a large exodus of New Yorkers from the city.

The fear extends well beyond New York to the rest of the country. Many people are afraid to work in or visit the Sears Tower. There are now cement barriers erected around it to protect it from a truck bomb attack.

People who live near nuclear plants or dams are afraid. Fear.

Of course, fear is nothing new. It is not just something that was brought in by the terrorists. Americans have long lived with a significant amount of cowardice. We don't necessarily call it that, but we see every day, ordinary cowardice around us and through us. What is it other than fear and cowardice that keeps us from telling the truth or to be moral? How many people lie at work just because they are afraid of the consequences of telling the truth?

"Oh yeah...your check is in the mail."

"Your shipment is going out Tuesday." When it isn't.

"The project is just about complete." When it isn't even started.

Cowardice is at the root of a lot of immoral behavior. A girl who won't stand up to her boyfriend and say "no" to premarital sex, no to what we have been doing – because she is afraid of losing him.

Cowardice is at the root of lots of failing marriages. We are too afraid to admit to a counselor, a pastor, to our small group leader, that we are having a problem, that we have some issues that we are unable to work out.

What keeps people so stuck in addictive behaviors other than sheer fear, cowardice? If I let anyone know that I have a drinking problem, or a substance abuse problem, or a problem of pornography or homosexuality, or an eating disorder, then they won't like me. They won't accept me.

A close relative of mine was recently the object of supreme cowardice. She worked for a little firm for 18 years. She was a close friend of the boss. They were frequently over to each other's homes and attended each other's birthdays.

They went out to dinner as married couples together. They knew intimate details of one another's lives. After 18 years of work, 18 years of relationship, the boss said to this relative of mine on the way home from work, "Oh, I've got some bad news. I am going to need to lay you off. Business hasn't been that great and since you are the highest paid employee, unfortunately, you're the one I have to lay off."

No discussion. No, "Hey, here's the truth; here are the options. We are not making enough money, would you be willing to take a cut in pay? Would you be willing to only work four days a week? Would you consider this or that?" Rather, she got a two-minute conversation at the end of the workday after 18 years of work.

Have you ever received a slip in your box that informed you that you were being laid off? It's late Friday afternoon, and so we don't have to face you, we've been planning this for months, you asked a boss, who you supposedly have a relationship with, "Is this coming down?" and you were told, "No, just hang in there," and then they have some low-level lackey hand you a pink slip.

What we deem a lack of character is often a lack of courage. When you watch people walk away from their commitments, refuse to take a moral stand, go the easy route rather than the right route, you are probably just witnessing every day fear.

Well, Jesus speaks to the issue of fear in the text that we are going to read together. I've called today's talk, "Faith that Overcomes Our Fears." Let's pray.

Matthew 14:22-33 - 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 into the hills by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night 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 and walked on the water to 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."

The disciples were caught in a furious storm and though they were rowing for perhaps six plus hours on the lake, they were making no progress. We read: *When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a*

considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night, Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.

The Romans used to divide up the evening into four watches – from roughly 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. The first watch was 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. The second watch was from 9:00 p.m. to 12:00 midnight. The third watch was from midnight to 3:00 a.m. and somewhere after 3:00 a.m. the disciples are still rowing, the wind is against them, they are straining with all of their might and making no progress.

Now, I want you to note the setting for this great hardship that the followers of Jesus are encountering on the Sea of Galilee. The setting, if you just look to the passage immediately preceding this one, is an experience of success by the disciples beyond their wildest dreams. We read in verse 21: *The number of those who ate was about 5000 men, besides women and children.* The crowds that were following Jesus had grown to about perhaps 15,000-20,000 people – maybe more. If you figure that each of the men had a wife and a child, that would be 15,000 people. If the men had more than one child, and Jewish families were very large like the families of most folks in the ancient world. Jewish families were very large. Jews valued having lots of kids. Jesus' own family had at least seven children, perhaps more depending upon the number of his sisters. But there were at least seven in Jesus' family. So, if each man had a few kids, we are talking about more than 20,000 people. Most pastors that I know would consider a congregation of 20,000+ people very successful. They would say, "God is certainly doing something here." I'm sure the disciples were impressed by the size of the crowds.

And the crowds were not coming because of the convenient location of the church building where Jesus was speaking. It wasn't right off of a major highway exit, or on some 6-lane road. We read back in verse 15: *As evening approached the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place and it is already getting late."* The crowds had to really work to meet with Jesus. Getting out to where Jesus was was really worse than driving on Cooper Road. These folks really had to make an effort.

But I found that if folks are meeting Jesus, they are willing to go out of their way. I have always been tremendously encouraged when I'm told by someone, "You know, we drive 50 miles to get here every week." We drive up from Circleville. Or down from Mansfield. Or Buckeye Lake or Bellefontaine. I've talked with folks who regularly drive 90 miles because they are finding Jesus here. That's always an encouragement.

But better than the crowds and the efforts people made to meet together was the experience of signs and wonders. The crowds were all fed. Food was being multiplied. Five loaves and two fishes fed a crowd of 20,000. And on top of all of that, we read in John 6 that the crowd wanted to make Jesus King.

So imagine the state of mind of the disciples when they were told by Jesus to get into the boat. They were already trying to figure out what position they would be in Jesus' newly formed government.

Here's my proposition today. People who have a strong faith are folks who have developed the habit of looking at life through the lens of the Bible. Let me illustrate one of the competing messages that you regularly hear in America is that normal life is supposed to be easy. And life is basically viewed as a "no sweat" proposition. And when life gets hard, we begin to believe that something is dreadfully wrong and we get afraid.

Is it not the case, friends, that in 21st century America we think that "normal living" basically means meeting all of our middle class needs? Now our needs are not that extensive. They just involve finding a spouse with whom you absolutely click all the time. A fundamentally hassle-free marriage that doesn't take a lot of work or sweat or strain. You just click emotionally, romantically, socially, physically. Someone who always understands you, who is always sensitive, always available, always a great listener, never angry, never irritable, never aloof, never depressed, never overweight – your basic spouse.

Normal life includes having enough cash to essentially do what you want to do. Fix up your home. Buy a great new car every few years. Travel to exotic locations. Eat out 3-4 times a week. Pay for a private college.

You and normal life includes you and your entire family enjoying great health virtually all the time. If one of you becomes sick, really sick, dreadfully ill, something is wrong. Life is not supposed to be like this. On those rare occasions when someone gets sick, we normal living Americans expect a doctor to immediately diagnose what's wrong and fix it right away.

There should be very few car or home repairs. There should be virtually no family conflict. No lay offs. Lots of leisure time to play and to meet with friends and to go to concerts and to watch football games. Plenty of money for retirement.

You know, normal life. Have you noticed in the wake of the World Trade Center disaster how many people have said, "Well, we need to get back to normal life." What they mean is life without problems, life without worries, life without fears, life without struggles, life without evil around us. Let's get back to normal.

Christians load up this middle class American view of the normal life with the supposed biblical message that it is somehow the will of God to meet all of our needs as we define those needs. To give us the no hassle spouse, the no hassle marriage, to give us health all the time and wealth and a firm tummy and an SUV large enough to pull a Carnival Cruise ship. Doesn't the Bible teach us that if you ask your father for bread, will he give you a stone? Translated into

contemporary language, if you ask him for a car, will he give you a Ford Escort? Of course not. If God loves me, he's going to make my life go easy.

You know, it takes faith to see through the American middle class myth. It takes real faith to see through the spiritual veneer that American Christians put over the middle class myth. It takes real faith to see, look through the lens and to see life in this fallen world is supposed to be hard.

Let me give you a definition of normal life. Normal life is living with the wind in your face. It is running against the wind. It is pedaling your bike against the wind. Normal life is not just sledding down hill. It is more like what I used to do with my kids in the winter. I would sled downhill with both of them on my back for about a minute and a half. And then I would carry one or both of them, along with the sled, up the hill for the next 20 minutes with the wind in my face.

Let this picture of the disciples straining with all of their might to make any progress; let this picture of the disciples rowing as hard as they can just to keep from going backwards; the wind in their face, their little boat buffeted by the storms. Let this picture of the disciples in the boat be branded on your mind as this is normal life. This world that we live in is not the paradise that God created at the beginning.

We live in a world that is cursed, that is fallen, that is outside of Eden. Jesus told us what normal life was like when he said in John 16:33, *In the world you will have trouble*. That's a promise from Jesus who never lies. In the world, in this life, while you are in your body you will have troubles – physical troubles, financial troubles, family troubles, marital troubles. And it takes faith to keep rowing when the wind is in your face, because every message you are going to hear, every thing from our middle class culture is saying, "Give up. Quit. If it is hard, you must be in the wrong place, the wrong job, the wrong marriage, the wrong ministry, the wrong city. It's not normal to have troubles. Quit. Throw in the towel. Give up. Don't hang in there and don't endure." Jesus said, "I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves."

This very day there are churches that are burned to the ground in different countries. Christians sit in prison in Afghanistan, in China, and in Cuba because of their faith. Anti-Christian mobs are killing Christians in Indonesia, in India, in the Sudan. Thousands of people, including many Christians die each year from hurricanes and earthquakes. Something like 40 million people worldwide are infected with the AIDS virus. There are over 10 million AIDS orphans, many of them who are born to parents who have received Christ in Sub-Sahara Africa. This is normal life.

People in our church, friends, have children and spouses who have serious disabilities. Christians in our church have had brain tumors, breast cancer, heart disease, arthritis, lupus. Christians in our church and wonderful Christians in

history have suffered from severe mental depression. The great preacher, Charles Spurgeon fought a lifelong battle against what he called “The Black Dog of Depression.” Here is the greatest preacher in the world, Charles Spurgeon, and he fought against the black dog of depression and tremendous physical pain as a result of chronic gout.

William Cowper, who was called “the poet” of the Wesleyan Revival in England in the 18th century, the great hymn writer who wrote the hymn, “There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel’s veins and sinners plunge beneath the flood, lose all their guilty stains.” William Cowper fought such lifelong depression that he regularly was tempted to commit suicide.

Trials, difficulties, afflictions, setbacks, life with the wind in your face – if you are having a hard go of it, if lots of your expectations, if lots of your dreams, have been shattered, then what this culture says is that you need to keep going and it’s not happened in your life, you are experiencing normal life. It takes bold faith, friend, to keep rowing, to see that your present difficulty is not a call for you to quit, to throw in the towel, or to give up, or to despair.

But there’s a second problem. There are also many voices in our great market place of ideas that says that not only should life be easy, but when it is hard, there is no point to the hardness, no one is in control, no one is calling the shots.

There was an article in the Dispatch regarding some of the people who worked at the World Trade Center who lived and some of the people who worked there who died. And the entire point of the article, which told story after story, was to suggest that chance, random happenstance rules our lives. That it was just because of the sheer chance of stopping for a newspaper or missing a train, or getting up late that a person wasn’t killed. And it was sheer chance that someone was invited to a meeting on one of the upper floors, or delivering a message that a person was killed.

I want to ask you a question because it is so fundamental to a life of faith that sees what other people don’t see, a life of faith that overcomes fear. I ask you, must you in order to be a biblical Christian say that ultimately behind the misuse of men and women’s freedom, behind Satan’s murderous and destructive intentions, behind what looks to the naked eye like utter randomness and chance, must you, to be a biblical Christian, drive a stake in the ground and say, ‘No, I don’t care what anyone says, or what I feel, or what I see, God is ultimately in control and his purpose, even in this tragedy, is a loving and good purpose.’

Friends, I tell you to be a biblical Christian, to look at life through the lenses of Scripture – and that is ultimately what faith is – faith is a way of seeing, a way of looking at life, we look at life as hard. We also must look at life as saying that ultimate causality belongs to God. And that God’s purpose is always good and loving.

Jesus was the one who made his followers get into the boat. He is the Lord of the storm.

I want you to listen to these Bible texts. You don't have to write them down necessarily, or even note the references, but I just want you to listen and let these texts soak into your mind.

In the book of Job, after all the losses that Job suffered, a lost fortune, a lost family, a lost health, Job didn't say, "Well, I see now that it was Satan who did this to me. It was Satan all the time." Or even, "It was the misuse of man's free will that ultimately did this to me." Job says in Job 42:1, *Then Job answered the Lord and said, "I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."* Satan had his role. People had their roles. But the ultimate causality belongs to God even when you can't understand it and you can't figure it out. It doesn't make any sense. Whether we are talking about sickness, or disease, or calamity, or persecution, we are told in Eph. 1:11, *God works all things after the counsel of his will.* God has a good and wise purpose in everything that happens.

Every morning, every evening we are supposed to say, according to the book of James in James 4:11, *If the Lord wills, we will live and also...this or that.* Why do we say, "If the Lord wills?" Because according to Isaiah 46:10, *God says, "My purpose will stand and I will do all that I please."*

Proverbs 16:9 says, *The mind of man plans his ways, but the Lord directs his steps.*

Jesus said in Matthew 10:29, *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny and not one of them falls to the ground without your Father's will.*

Nothing falls to the ground, not a sparrow, not a person, not a plane, not a building apart from the Father's will. I don't know what God's intention is in this current, horrific tragedy. God's intention is only normally seen in light of the passage of time – several weeks later, several months later, several years later, several decades later. Generally, only history, and a historical perspective lets us in on the secret purposes of God. In the Bible, sometimes we don't find God's purpose for a certain event revealed for centuries. "Oh...that's why that happened."

But faith sees in the midst of the storm that God's purposes are always good.

The apostle Paul, one of God's chosen vessels in this world, someone precious to the Lord, the apostle Paul was beaten and thrown into prison on many occasions – just randomness chance? No purpose to life? No meaning? Just the misuse of the free will of men? Just Satan's attack on the kingdom and on

Paul? Or did God have a design to allow Paul the space and time to write most of the New Testament?

David Brainerd was so fragile medically that he was spitting up blood in college. Virtually every modern mission board would reject him as a candidate because of his medical condition. He became a missionary to Indians living in the western part of Connecticut back in the early 1700's. And he died at age 30. But the story of David Brainerd, this tragic life, this abbreviated life, the life of David Brainerd has inspired more people to go into Christian missions than virtually any other life in the history of mankind.

Perhaps the clearest example of all of God's purpose is the awful crucifixion of his Son, Jesus, would accomplish the salvation of the world. That this man nailed to a cross, beaten bloody, hanging naked in a garbage dump – that's where the cross was planted – in a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem, where Jews would go to burn their garbage – God had a secret loving purpose in the death of his Son Jesus. Who would have imagined that the garbage dump would become the gateway to paradise?

You know, the great saints, especially the worship leaders, the song writers, the hymn writers, the great saints in the history of the church have always saw that behind all of the hardships and tragedies that we experience in life is the good and loving purpose of God. Listen to the words of a hymn written by William Cowper, the man I spoke of before who struggled so much in life with horrible dark depression. Listen to these words:

*Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs
And works his sovereign will.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain:
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.*

Behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face. Do you believe that, friend?

Or how about this hymn by Lina Sandell, who was the daughter of Jonas Sandell, a pastor of a Lutheran church in Sweden. When she was 26 years old, she accompanied her father on a boat trip to Gotenbergl, during which her father fell overboard and drowned before her eyes. This tragedy profoundly affected Lina and inspired her to write hymns, one of the best known of which is *Day By Day*.

*Day by day, and with each passing moment,
Strength I find to meet my trials here;
Trusting in my Father's wise bestowment,
I've no cause for worry or for fear.
He whose heart is kind beyond all measure
Gives unto each day what he deems best
Lovingly, it's part of pain and pleasure,
Mingling trial with peace and rest.*

God is kind beyond all measure. Life comes to the Christian as the Father's wise bestowment. Every day God gives you what he deems best. Lovingly, it's part of pain and pleasure. But he gives us in the midst of the pain and pleasure, strength to meet our trials here.

Let me ask you something. Is your faith the kind and quality that these hymn writers wrote about? That the Bible writers wrote about? Do you see that God is working a good and loving purpose for you in every circumstance, even when it is puzzling, even when you don't see it, even when the evidence to your senses all seems to be stacked on the other side? Even in the pain of a lay-off? Even in a loved one's illness? Even when your loan doesn't come through for school? Even when your child is in rebellion? Or your inability to get pregnant? Even in death and tragedy?

There are lots of messages that the world sends us that make it difficult to see Jesus when the wind is in your face. It is a fight of faith to see and proclaim the uniqueness of Christ when everyone says that all religions are the same.

One of the strongest messages that has come through in the wake of this tragedy is the perspective that we hear over and over again that the only real protection against fanaticism is for no one to claim that their own religion is unique or that their God is unique or that their faith is true in a way that others aren't. If we really want to be safe and live in a liberal and tolerant world, then let us all agree that basically all religions teach the same thing and that no faith is specially revealed.

Mayor Rudolph Guilliani spoke in front of the United Nations recently. He was the first New York mayor to do so in 30 years. Mayor Guilliani, who has handled

this crisis with grace and wisdom, basically verbalized the generally held perspective when he said before the United Nations General Assembly's Special Session on Terrorism, "Since I've been mayor there have been many weekends when I would go to a mosque on Friday, a synagogue on Saturday, and a church, sometimes two churches, on Sunday. And by the time I'd finish I would say to myself, 'I know that we are all getting through to the same God, even though we're doing it in slightly different ways. God is known by many different names and in many different traditions. But it is the same God.'"

The message essentially, friends, has been that it is dangerous and arrogant and somehow un-American to assert any uniqueness for Christ or for what God has done through Christ. And we must sort these things out. It is entirely appropriate for us to say that we are all of us Americans – Jews, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, atheists – we all of us have a stake in this country. We all of us deserve to share in our country's protection and blessings, living under the protection of our country's laws. We Christians, most of all, support the freedom to worship as our conscience dictates. We understand that we can never be coerced, never be required, that it must be, in order to be genuine faith, a free response of the heart to the love of God. But faith that overcomes fear in the midst of a storm, the faith that is spoken of in the Bible, sees Christ as unique when everyone else in the world says, "All Gods are the same and all religions are the same."

Jesus here is presented as the one who walks on the water. We read in verse 25, *During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them walking on the lake.* The only one in the Old Testament that is said to walk on water is God. Psalm 77:19 says, *Your path [speaking to the Lord] led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen.* Job 9:8 says, *He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the seas.*

The disciples didn't quite understand the uniqueness of Christ. They didn't know that he was God incarnate, God came in the flesh, God with a human face. But Jesus revealed himself as unique not only by walking on water, but by speaking in verse 27. *But Jesus immediately said, 'Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid.* Literally, in the Greek it reads, "Courage, I am. Fear not." Those words "I am" in Greek, EIGO EIMI, are the same words that Jesus uses in John 8 when he says, *Before Abraham was, I am.* They are the same words that the Lord God used to reveal himself to Moses when he said in the burning bush: *I am who I am. Tell them I am sent you. Yahweh.* Jesus is saying, "That's who I am. I am Yahweh. The one who spoke to Moses in the burning bush. The one who is self-existent. The one creator."

And at the end of the story, Jesus' uniqueness is recognized by his followers in verse 33 when we read: *Those who were in the boat worshiped him saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'*

Friends, we can find truth in all of the world's major religions, goodness, morals, love and compassion. But we deny our profession of faith as Christians, if we don't proclaim that Christ is God's unique Son, that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man. That there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved, other than the name Jesus. That he is the way, the truth and the life. And that there is no way to the Father except through him.

Friends, I tell you it takes faith in the midst of all of the pluralistic messages today and the messages of moral relativity and religious relativity to see Jesus as unique. Listen, if the people whom the apostles preached the message of Christ to were mainly Jews and God-fearers, then they already had faith – these folks that the apostles preached to. They already had the Old Testament. The apostles did not come along to the Jews of their day, all the God-fearers of their day and say to them, “We have come to announce to you that you are already right with God just as you are. Just keep doing what you are doing. You are already right with God.” The apostles' message to the Jews of their day and the God-fearers was, “Here and now you become right with God through faith in Jesus Christ and in his substitutionary death for your sins on the cross. There is no other way.”

Do you understand that the message of Christ's uniqueness has never been popular? It is not only unpopular at this particular moment in history when all of the politicians are trying to knock off the distinctiveness of each of the world's religions. The message of Christ has never been popular. The apostles were martyred because they proclaimed Jesus the Only. Had they merely been willing to say, “Look, Jesus is one of many gods. He is an option.” If they had even said, “Jesus is the best option” they would have been safe from the arena, safe from being crucified, safe from being fed to lions and having their heads cut off. It was Jesus the Only that caused our forefathers in the faith to be martyred.

The notion that all religions basically teach the same thing is not just an affront to us as Christians, it is an affront to every believer in every other religion. Somehow we can boil down our religions to some sort of generic store brand lowest common denominator. People who say that every religion teaches exactly the same thing are merely showing their ignorance.

I was a comparative religion major in college. Not all of the differences in the world's religions can be reconciled. At some points, a person must choose. For example, most Muslims deny that Jesus of Nazareth died on a cross. Muslim tradition is that someone other than Jesus died on the cross. That at the last moment, God substituted someone else. Christians say it was Jesus of Nazareth who died on a cross and that he did so to pay for the sins of the world. Did Jesus die on a cross or didn't he? We need his atonement to have access to God don't we? Are the Muslims right or are the Christians right?

Muslims deny that Jesus is God come in the flesh. Christians say that Jesus is God in the flesh. Well, is Jesus God or isn't he? Are the Muslims right or are the Christians right?

Do you see Jesus' uniqueness? If you don't, you may not yet be a Christian. If you don't see that this one who walks on water is unique, you may not as yet be a Christian.

Or perhaps you need to be better informed about the Christian faith. There are lots of good books that can assist you to find out why we Christians believe what we believe. What evidence there is for believing in Jesus, in the cross, and in the Bible? One of the better books that has come out in the last few years is a book by Lee Strobel titled "The Case for Christ." We have some copies available in our bookstore. He also wrote another wonderful little book called "The Case for Faith."

If you say that you do believe in the uniqueness of Christ, does your faith go so far as to enable you to speak up for Christ even when it has become culturally unpopular or intellectually unpopular in your setting? Everything in you tells you to not speak up. You are a student, you are a professor at a university, you are working in an office – everyone in the office holds the opinion, everyone in the class, everyone in your academic circle holds the opinion that every religion teaches the same thing. That we all worship the same God. Does your faith go so far, is it so bold as for you to stand up and say, "No. There is something unique about Jesus. Jesus is different. Jesus is in a category of one. Here's who Jesus is."

Faith sees that with God all things are possible, even when everyone tells you it is impossible. We'll finish with this – verse 28: *"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come out to you on the water." "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat and walked on the water to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid.*

Everyone around tells you that something is impossible for you, just like everyone around says that all religions are the same. And everyone around you says that life is random and meaningless. And everyone around you says that life should be easy. Everyone around you tells you that something is impossible for you. You are 40. You can't go back to school at your age. It's too difficult. You have two children now. Faith sees that with God, all things are possible.

Whoever told you you could be a missionary? It's impossible. You've always struggled with languages. It's dangerous and uncomfortable. Settle down, buy a house. Calm down. Just conform. Faith sees that with God, all things are possible.

You, with your background, believing that you could lead a home group or women's group? Come on. You are lucky if you can even host a group in your home. Faith sees that with God, all things are possible.

Pray for the sick? See someone get well through your hands? Forget it. You can't even cure your own headache with a bottle of aspirin. Faith sees that with God, all things are possible.

Go back to your failed marriage? Are you crazy? Your mother, your best friend, the Christian counselor you went to several times are all saying that it is over and to forget him, forget her. It's impossible.

The world constantly tells you that something God is calling you to is impossible. I'm sure the other disciples in the boat with Peter were saying, "Don't do it. Don't get out of the boat. You'll sink like a stone." But faith sees that with God all things are possible.

When we opened this building last year, I preached a message on dangerous dreams. I said to you that what God wants for the Vineyard is to have a church full of dangerous dreamers – not just people who play it safe, close to the vest, do the reasonable thing all the time. But what God wants is a church full of dangerous dreamers. Why can't we have a church that is racially integrated? So what if everyone says that people want to worship with those only who look like them? It's not what God wants. It's not what God calls for. It's not what God sent his Son to die for. Why can't we pray and ask God to grant us a racially integrated church and a racially integrated leadership team?

Why can't we see thousands and thousands of people come to Christ and to try to persuade every person to live a life radically devoted to Jesus and his ways? Why not? Must we say, "Well, we've seen enough. It's big enough. There are enough followers of Jesus. We've worked hard enough." Why not put a really large scooper down in Central Ohio and allow thousands of people to spend eternity with Christ.

Why can't we keep rowing against the wind? Why can't we start dozens of new churches filled with dangerous dreamers? Why can't we leave a mark on Columbus and the world forever? That people in the next generation will know that we passed this way. Why not?

I want to close with one of my favorite quotes from a man who lived out what he said. His name was Teddy Roosevelt. Here's what Roosevelt said back in 1910. "It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who was actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood. Who strives valiantly. Who errs, who comes short again and again because there is no effort without error and shortcoming. But who

does actually strive to do the deeds. Who knows great enthusiasms and great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who, at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

There is little use for the being whose timid soul knows nothing of great and generous emotion, of the high pride, the stern belief, the lofty enthusiasm of the man who quells the storm and rides the thunder. Well for these men, if they succeed. Well also, though not quite so well, if they fail. Given only that they have nobly ventured and have put forth all their heart and mind and strength.”

Friends – there are always going to be uninvolved critics; arm-chair quarterback who will tell you or tell the church why something Christ is asking you to do can't be done. People can't walk on water. Why live a little? Why not dare to be a dangerous dreamer?

This is the faith that overcomes fear. The faith that goes for it, that risks, that responds to what you believe Jesus is saying to you, even when the wind is in your face and life is hard. Let's pray.

Faith that Overcomes Our Fears

Rich Nathan

October 6 and 7, 2001

Renewing Your Spiritual Passion Series

Matthew 14:22-31

- I. Faith That Sees That Normal Life Is Hard When Everyone Says Life Should Be Easy

- II. Faith That Sees God's Goodness And Sovereignty When Everyone Says Life Is Random And Out Of Control

- III. Faith That Sees And Proclaims The Uniqueness Of Christ When Everyone Says All Religions Are The Same

- IV. Faith That Sees That With God All Things Are Possible When Everyone Says It's Impossible