ORDINARY TIME TWELFTH SUNDAY YEAR B 2015 HOMILY
(Job 38: 1, 8-11; 2 Corinthians 5: 14-17; Mark 4: 35-41)

WE’RE ALL IN THE SAME BOAT

For the first couple of years when I was in graduate school at the University of Minnesota, I lived in an all-male floor of a graduate dorm. It was a little bit like a fraternity. We became close and I still have good friends from that time. We entered an intramural team in almost every sport that was popular in that time and place. We also went on outings together. One memorable one was a spring night we spent in a cruise boat on Lake Minnetonka just to the southwest of the Twin Cities. This was a huge lake which I have since learned is the ninth largest of the 10,000 lakes in Minnesota. We were having a great time when, all of a sudden, a storm came up – complete with high winds and plenty of thunder and lightning. For some reason, this weather was not predicted. The captain ordered everyone to put on life jackets. It was pretty scary for about twenty minutes, but then things got calm just as fast as they had become turbulent. It was quite an experience. Even the few who weren’t drinking sobered up pretty quickly!

The storm in today’s Gospel from St. Mark came up without warning too, and I’m sure the boat that Jesus and his disciples were riding in was not as sturdy as that Minnetonka cruise ship back in the late 1960s. But Jesus was with them – and that made all the difference for his frightened followers. The boat has for the whole of Christian history been a symbol of the church. The "barque of Peter" (as it is called) has been a synonym for the people of God sailing to “the other shore” of heaven. We’re all in this vessel that is sometimes tossed upon the seas of this world by persecution from without and betrayal from within. In our time, more and more people are jumping overboard and leaving the church so that, even in the United States which is quite religious compared to other prosperous countries, the number of folks claiming no religion or even atheism is rising dramatically. What is the reason for this storm of defection? There are many possible answers from modern American culture is depraved to the church itself has lost credibility because of the sex abuse scandals. The answer is somewhere between these two extremes.

Along the spectrum of causes for the phenomenon of a loss of faith, there seems to be a growing sense among many that they don’t need God – at least not God in the church. This makes little sense to committed Catholics like you and me who believe that we have to be connected to God and to each other in that boat. I have often heard it said when tragedy strikes a Christian family, “thank God I have faith because I don’t think I could make it if I didn’t.” You also hear it said at times like death or serious illness or other crises something like “we are so grateful for the support of our faith community.” I recently received a note from a parishioner who said “I cannot remember the name of the priest who visited me when I was in rehab or the names of that couple who brought me communion during that time, but I just needed to tell someone ‘thank you.’” This was a remarkable letter which moved me deeply. The truth is that probably the priest and the couple would not remember doing these good deeds, either, because for good Christians such good works are second nature. And it does not become second nature without Christ who is steering the ship because he gives us the strength of his grace and the example of his selflessness. Even if we forget the good we do, he remembers for us.

We’re all in the same boat and, unless we care for one another, some will be lost in the storms at sea. In the barque of Peter are those who need healing or companionship or forgiveness or peace – or perhaps all of the above. I think that Pope Francis is calling us to take on more passengers in the ship of the church by going ashore to find those who have been forgotten. One of the big gulfs in a parish like ours is the chasm between the well off and the poor. People who are down and out in any way do not feel
comfortable here despite the fact that St. Paul people are very welcoming and would do their best to embrace them. The pope is saying that it is not enough to wait for the marginalized to come to us; we must go to them.

I am not just talking about the economically deprived. I believe that the church boat has to begin to make stops at the ports of the addicts and of the families torn apart by divorce or strife, and at the ports of the single parents and of gay people, and at the ports of families with severely challenged and disabled children and at the ports of those who have done time in jail and of those who are so lonely they can’t stand it anymore – and maybe stops at many other ports of call as well. We have to figure out ways to take more of these folks on board as we sail along in the church. Every parish is also called, in the spirit of Pope Francis, to be a place of refuge for those who are different from us, especially recent immigrants, and those whose racial or cultural backgrounds are dramatically different from ours. All ought to be welcome in our boat.

This week we witnessed a spectacle way beyond shocking of a young man killing nine people of a different race from his in a church after he had participated in Bible Study with them. He may be mentally ill, but he also was raised in a part of our country where racism is fed to children along with their mothers’ milk. By contrast, the members of the boat known as “Mother Emmanuel “ church of Charleston, South Carolina, welcomed this young man on board and they have a history of opening their arms to all. And most admirable and indeed unbelievably heart-warming is the fact that no member of this congregation who has lost kin or friends in the blood bath have talked of anything but forgiveness and healing. There is no hint of revenge. It is as if Jesus is saying to them in this storm (as he also did in the Gospel today), “Be still.” We are so like Christ when we can quiet our anger and our urge to seek revenge. I cannot help but wonder if our St. Paul’s parishioners could be like those of Emmanuel in (God forbid) a similar situation. I really trust that the answer would be “yes.” We and all churches in Christ’s ship definitely have the strongest possible witness from Christians like the people of Emmanuel. (And, interestingly enough, Emmanuel means “God is with us.”)

Let us as a parish continue our journey across the sea with a daily increasing trust in Christ at the helm. Let us live simply and neighborly and be willing to go to those ports where few ships dock so that we can know an ever growing joyful conviction that we human people are all in the same boat. May we also have the well-founded hope that we are safe from the storms of sin and hatred and even death itself if we live every day as new creatures who have the courage to do the right thing because we truly believe that Jesus who is risen in us is also on board with us!