

The Bridge Beneath Our Feet
Matthew 14:22-33
Episcopal Address
Northern Illinois Annual Conference
St. Charles, IL
June 6, 2016

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. **23** And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, **24** but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. **25** And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. **26** But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. **27** But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

28 Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." **29** He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. **30** But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" **31** Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" **32** When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. **33** And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFntFdEGgws>

You've just seen a short clip from Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade; a Steven Spielberg film from 1989. The scene is where Indiana Jones is trying to find his father who was in search of the Holy Grail. But Indy's father is wounded and so he embarks on an action adventure to save him. In the course of getting to his father, he comes to a bottomless pit/abyss. The bad guys are chasing him and he comes to a precipice. He senses his father telling him to have faith. Indy has to trust the map in the diary his father made which shows the invisible bridge upon which Indiana Jones must step.

Indy has to take a step out into nothingness, trusting that the bridge is really there beneath his feet. He says, "it's a leap of faith." Not sure what will happen, he takes that step and finds the bridge beneath his feet to successfully walk across it...to the next challenge!

Since last year's annual conference, the image of Indiana Jones stepping out over the abyss, trusting that the bridge would be beneath his feet, has been like a constant prayer for me. These are times in which none of us, if we are honest, know exactly where we are going and how to get there. We truly have to walk by faith and not by sight, trusting

that there's a bridge beneath our feet as we step out in faith. We can't stay where we are; we must go forward in faith but we don't know the path forward. It's untested and untried, not even visible to us as the "ways we've always done things" are visible to us.

The church is like that boat that Jesus sent out into the waters. The storms of our times are beating against the church. It's sickening at times to be in the boat. I'm seasick in the chaos of change, aren't you? The disciples were afraid and Jesus wasn't anywhere to be found. Luke's telling of this story has Jesus sound asleep in the back of the boat on a cushion! I want to yell: "Jesus, where are you? We could use a little help over here!" Or, "Jesus, wake up and help us!"

We're afraid in the church today. We're afraid that our churches are declining and we don't know what to do as clergy or laity. Like those in the boat, I'm sure you've stayed awake at night, worrying. You've undoubtedly been afraid that you won't have enough money to pay the bills, especially the pastor and staff. You've been afraid that your church is trying a new thing and it might fail. You've been afraid that your church hasn't tried a new thing to see if it will fail or succeed.

This year has been one in which I have been afraid for this annual conference. We were on the bubble to be yoked with another conference last fall but due to the addition of the new people in our new faith communities across the NCJ, we dodged that one...for now.

I've been afraid that we don't have enough money to do what we need as an annual conference to support our mission, to start new churches and revitalize existing ones as well as to support necessary infrastructure.

I've been afraid that as we make change we won't make enough change or we'll make too much change, that we're going too slow or going too fast. As you know if you were a part of the listening sessions, everyone wants change, we just don't want to be the ones who change! But you want the bishop to lead change that you want but that you don't want to have to do! I've been afraid of that, too!

We all live in the storms of change and it makes us afraid! But we are called to walk by faith, not by sight; not to live in fear but to live in faith. We are not the first ones in our Christian history to come to the edge of a precipice with everything collapsing, disappearing, shifting and changing behind and unknown ahead of us.

I'm pretty sure of one thing: we're not going back to the way it's been. Where it was easy to open the doors of the church and people just came through them to live their lives with us. Where the church was the center of peoples' social life. When we didn't have to have a clear mission, vision and core values in order to be the church and so we could do pretty much what we wanted to do with a reasonable amount of resources because we had them.

But then, we're also not going back to when people of color and women, for instance, weren't lift up and celebrated. When we couldn't even talk about human sexuality and acknowledge that there have always been LGBTQ laity and clergy in the church. When we didn't have to trust in God to stay true to a mission because we relied on our own strength. Before we lost our ability to share our faith because we didn't have to share it—SS taught our children and no one really needed to articulate faith to a “non-religious” culture/neighbors.

I believe there is hope for our future but hope for the future isn't hope for what has been to be again; hope for the future is to trust that if we walk by faith and not by sight—trust in the bridge beneath our feet—we will find ourselves in a new place, doing things differently, being the church as we are, not how we've been; being true to the mission of following Jesus. We're in the midst of the old dying around us but without really being able to see the new that is emerging; like an invisible bridge, we must step out in faith!

You might be saying to yourself, “You know, this gospel story doesn't end well for Peter.” Yes, he began to sink when he looked around him and saw the strong wind. Hmmm, it wasn't the water beneath him that made him afraid; it was the *wind* whipping everything around him. The winds/tornados of fear make us sink and threaten to make us fall into the abyss. Fear and grief paralyze us and keep us from stepping out in faith.

Newsflash in case you don't know the story or forgot: Peter didn't drown! As the old saying goes, at least Peter got out of the boat! Peter was out there on the waves where Jesus could reach out to him. “You of little faith! Why did you have doubts?” Jesus admonishes them. Well, of course Peter had doubts. We do, too, especially about anything that makes us want to hope that new life can come into our local churches, that our annual conference overall can grow again, that we will have resources for ministry and mission, and that we will do the things we need to do, step by step, trusting in the bridge beneath our feet of God's grace, to make it through.

“Come to me,” Jesus said. The best thing to do when you're afraid is to step out toward Jesus; to do something! Not just anything, but to develop a plan that keeps our eyes on Jesus. I've always believed that it was when Peter began to look around at the wind and even the roiling sea, taking his eyes off of Jesus, that he began to be in trouble.

As you know, as CCFA began to wrestle with our financial difficulties, and called me and others in to find out what was going on and how we can be a stronger, better aligned and streamlined conference, CCFA commissioned the Landscape process. Our consultant, Susan Cszolgsz will review our process in a minute, but what's important to know is that throughout these conversations—and as we continue forward—we have to figure out what does the local church need that *only* the annual conference can provide? How do we keep the local church the focus of all of the annual conference's work? It is at the local church where disciples are made, communities are changed, and the world around

us experiences something of the hope and grace that it longs for. How does the annual conference focus its energies more carefully and in alignment with that task?

In our Purpose Summit, we remembered the stated purpose of an annual conference--or the structure, staff, budgeting and programming of the annual conference: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by equipping its local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church; all to the glory of God.” The purpose of the annual conference isn’t to serve the annual conference but to serve the local church in its mission which is to make disciples.

Our vision of what we want our annual conference to be is a structure, staffing, programming and budget that “makes and supports vital Christians in vital congregations that engage with their communities and the world for peace, justice and mercy.” The annual conference’s vision is to help local churches make disciples, have vital congregations and engage in their communities and the world. The work of the mission is at the local church. It is up to you—how do we best help *you*, equip and empower *you* to do the work, fulfill the mission of making disciples in *your* community through your church?

In addition to fear and uncertainty about the church, hurt seems to envelop this annual conference—its clergy and its local churches. In the listening sessions, we heard stories and cries of pain, anger and grief from clergy and laity alike. We have all failed each other in ministry. Bishops and DSEs have failed clergy and local churches. Clergy have failed to support each other in the boat and to carefully and successfully steer the boats/churches that they have been entrusted to them. Communities have failed churches and churches have failed communities.

The pain and grief goes every which way...and we can choose to live there if we want or we can begin to build and rebuild relationships with each other, forgiving each other and letting each other be a new being in Christ just as we want to be a forgiven and a new being in Christ. On behalf of all of us, I confess that we have failed God and each other. But we must not let our grief, anger and pain overlook the many wonderful and gifted clergy and laity in wonderful and fruitful ministries throughout this annual conference. We probably need to celebrate more! To give thanks to God. We must trust that God’s grace is the bridge beneath our feet and the way toward healing.

Out of the Listening Sessions, then, the Landscape Team picked up themes of hope for the annual conference going forward. These are *aspirational* values that we want to permeate the way we as the annual conference do our work in equipping local churches, building trust and relationships as well as making decisions:

- Focus on mission
- Evaluation, accountability and support for growth

- Experimentation and risk-taking (with room for failure) for the purpose of learning
- Transparency
- Honesty and graciousness with each other
- Safe spaces for sharing
- Relationship-building
- Provision of resources/services closer to the local church
- Fostering and celebrating diversity (as a conference, in our community and in the world)

None of these are things that we can legislate; we can't legislate attitudes/mindset and aspirations. But keeping these aspirational values in mind and using them in our work as an annual conference—in the work of committees, the kind of programming we do, the attitudes and actions of staff, and the way in which we build our budget and expend it for mission—will require a lot of change on the part of all of us. Much of the change is attitudinal/mindset on everyone's part, beginning with conference leadership and continuing throughout the clergy and laity in the local church.

This morning you will hear some of the results of the Landscape Survey, the Purpose Summit and its Listening Sessions and some of the ways we are *beginning* to do things differently for the purpose of supporting local churches and discerning and aligning as an annual conference structure, programming, staffing and budgeting our vision.

With CCFA, the Landscape Team will present two areas listed on your brochure at your table—the legislation that they submitted. In addition, I just want to point out that the Landscape Team didn't work on who and what we need for staffing. You will see a group that has been organized to begin that work right after annual conference. But throughout this annual conference, there will be others reporting on what they will be doing differently so keep the brochure nearby.

After Indiana Jones gets to the other side, he throws some substance back on the bridge to make it invisible again. Obviously in the story he needs to make sure that no one gets an easy pass across the abyss! But in my own thinking about walking by faith, not by sight, I think it means for us to realize that once we find a way forward, do a new thing, we have to let go of thinking that we've found the final answer! We won't get it all right and we'll have some unintended consequences. But that must not stop us from making change. We must become a culture that experiments, risks, fails, evaluates, continues to learn, and then do another new thing. There's no path or bridge behind us; it's always a matter of stepping out on faith, trusting that God is the bridge beneath our feet. So let's be gentle with each other as we make this journey down this road of faith together.

Our Landscape consultant, Susan C, will remind us what we have learned about ourselves as an annual conference and then the Landscape Team will make their report.

Re-cap:

1. Landscape began as a way to prioritize the budget but it proceeded 1) to insure that we are good stewards of our resources and derive the maximum benefit from them, based on the needs of the annual conference and 2) to strengthen our connection as an annual conference.
2. The Landscape Team itself will dissolve after annual conference because the work has been given to various entities within the annual conference. They have received the information and have pledged to respond and/or act upon it. You will hear some of the ways that some entities have chosen to respond immediately.
3. However, change is a tension between trying to do things quickly in order to experience renewal but also recognizing that it takes time. Not only as long as I am here, but whoever is the bishop in the next 4 years, we will continue to drill down on what we have learned and continue to listen and change.
4. Again, “What does the local church need that only the AC can provide in terms of equipping and empowering to make disciples, and engage in our communities and the world?” This is the predominant question that we need to ask at every annual conference meeting!
5. WHAT TO DO WITH THE RESPONSES AT THE TABLE?

Ending:

Congressman John Lewis tells a story about his childhood in Alabama. When he was about four years old, he was in his Aunt Seneva’s house with about 15 other children—brothers and sisters, cousins and friends. They were playing in her dirt yard. The sky began to cloud over, the wind started to pick up, and lightning flashed far off in the distance. John and the other children were terrified of the storm.

Aunt Seneva was the only adult around so she herded everyone into her house as the sky got darker and the wind got stronger. Her house wasn’t the biggest house around and it was cramped with all the children in it. The wind was howling now and the house was starting to shake. They were scared. Aunt Seneva was scared, too.

And it got worse. The house began to sway and the wood plank flooring began to bend. And then a corner of the room started to lift up. The storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With the children and Aunt Seneva in it.

That’s when Aunt Seneva told the children to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she told them.

Aunt Seneva had the children walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. They began to walk toward the wind and the rising floor, keeping the floor down.

Once they got to the corner, they then walked back the other direction as the other end of the house began to lift. And so they went, back and forth, 15 children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of their little bodies...clasped together against the wind.

Everyone on your feet! The winds are blowing but unlike Indiana Jones or even Peter, we don't face the winds of change by ourselves. Like the children being buffeted by the wind, we must clasp hold of each other and face the harsh winds of reality with our very beings, people of faith, people willing to walk by faith, not by sight.