



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 14A, AUGUST 13, 2023
ZECHARIAH 9:9-12; PSALM 145:8-15; ROMANS 7:15-25; MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

THE PROBLEM WITH AMBITION



Matthew 14:22-33 [*Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save*

me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”]

When I was in first grade the principal of my school came to our classroom as we were lining up for lunch. He was making his rounds and said to us, it’s February 12, do you know whose birthday it is? Someone said Abraham Lincoln, since we’d just learned about him that morning. The principal then asked if we knew what other great person’s birthday is also in February, presumably seeking the presidential answer of George Washington, but I shot my hand up and blurted out that my birthday was February 13, the next day.

The principal was greatly humored by my apparent ambitious response, so much so that he told my mother, who carried the story in the family lore for years to come. I’m not sure I was aspiring to anything that day beyond the glee of having my birthday recognized and honored, but somehow that interaction oddly prompted me to consider how I could be president someday, if I wanted to, and I am a bit embarrassed to say it was a real thing for some time. Only in the last fifteen years or so have I come to my senses and realized neither do I want that job, nor do I think I’d be particularly good at it.

Ambition is a dangerous thing. St. Augustine said that worldly ambition was the single greatest obstacle to Christian virtuous living. Presumably he knew this from first-hand experience. His human foibles are well-documented as are his struggles to resist them. He wrote of what he called *libido principandi*, the human propensity of lust to be first.ⁱⁱ We embolden our kids with it; we let it seep into all parts of our lives. It is an insidious, even treacherous vice if we are really honest.

The disciple Peter offers quite the case study for our consideration of such things. He is described across the gospels as courageous, faithful, even the wise one who recognizes Jesus’ true identity. But he is also ambitious, impertinent, even spontaneous to a fault.

I must confess that I have preached on this passage several times through the years, and always commending Peter for his courage and faith to step out into stormy waters to come to the one for whom he was willing to give everything. I believe all that to be true, and I cannot recall ever hearing another sermon which said otherwise.

But I read an essay this week by Adam Hearlson, a Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia, who suggests that Peter's impetuous leap from the boat was a bad idea.ⁱⁱⁱ A ridiculous idea. Peter was going to sink, and he should have stayed in the boat, helping the others bail water. Jesus was coming to them after all, to save them.

Peter made it about himself. "Lord, if it is you, command me to come." The scene that unfurls from there is well-known, and I've always taken Jesus' upbraiding of Peter here—Why did you doubt?—as being about his sinking as he lurches toward Jesus. Centuries of art have said so.

But Hearlson asks us to consider that perhaps Jesus is beseeching Peter to consider why he left the boat in the first place. Why did he doubt the boat was the best place to be in the storm? Why did he stop rowing and leave his friends to fend the crashing waves without him? And then, alone, separated from his community, he sinks. His ambition, his *libido principandi*, rendered him untethered, unmoored. Note that Jesus doesn't place Peter back on the water's surface; he places him back in the boat where he can return to rowing with his friends once more, which is a great metaphor for Christian community.

William Casey King authored a book on ambition, tracing its history from being the vice about which Augustine and others wrote, to becoming a veritable virtue in western civilization.^{iv} Warrior leaders have always followed their ambitions to violent ends of conquests, but the early Church critiqued that imperial fervor and cautioned Christians to deny their own impulses to such proclivities, however small or large.

But with the rise of western European exploration and its colonial fervor, ambition was retranslated as passion to convert the lost so they might be saved. The vice became a virtue for the powerful rationalizing the dehumanizing violence for economic gain, and *libido principandi* was converted from obstacle to Christian piety to the character needed to achieve human flourishing.

And this thread is sown right into the fabric of our modern life: we are taught from an early age that ambition is the catalyst for making it big, for pulling oneself up from the bootstraps, for justifying the social woes we face today (poverty, housing crisis, work conditions, etc.) as somehow acceptable consequences for the flourishing that some gain in the process. Someone else's suffering is caused by their lack of ambition and therefore is not my problem. It's an insidious, treacherous lie.

What is Jesus saying to us amidst the storms of our time? And what merit is there to staying in the boat as we find our way?

I should note that ambition as I've laid it out here is complicated. Women often cannot be seen as ambitious as men in the workplace without suffering slings and arrows of contempt. People of color often are not even allowed in the halls of ambitious industry, and often are blocked from the educational and economic pathways to get there. So let's hold before us that not every child is afforded the potential reality that they can become president if they want to, or whatever else might be their dream.

But at some level, we all want to be distinguished, set apart, recognized, honored,

deemed significant in the ways we stand out. It's human nature, so pretending it is not true isn't the answer, and will likely just leave us with a sinking feeling when things don't turn out like we hoped.

This Christian way of life, at its core, invites us to stay in the boat, work together amidst the storms that beset us, be aware of our ambitions and the potential traps they may set for us and others, and when we do find ourselves sinking, to ask Christ to help us get back in the boat.

And remember, as St. Teresa said, we the Body are Christ's hands and feet in this world.

ⁱ Illustration by Jorm Sangsorn / iStock / Getty. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/ambition-used-be-vice>

ⁱⁱ Augustine wrote about this at length in Confessions. I've excerpted a few ideas here, drawn from the essay by Hearlson as referenced below.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hearlson, Adam. https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/ambition-used-be-vice?code=HQocL8CztENLpWFkt5jC&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=e0139c281e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_SCFREE_2023-08-07&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_a11c3b8de1-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D

^{iv} King, William Casey. *Ambition, a History: From Vice to Virtue*. Yale Univ. Press. 2013.