

From 2013 to 2015, I had given my life to a small multiethnic congregation within a larger Korean UMC in Homewood and Flossmoor, Illinois and literally ended up clothing the naked and feeding the hungry. With the partnership with the South Suburban PADS, townships, and other surrounding organizations, I worked hard with the congregation I served to feed the homeless and low income families while helping them establish a clothing and furniture pantry for the low income families and those graduating from the PADS program. Dealing with conflict within their church structure and issues of generational and cultural gaps which spanned throughout the life of that church of 30 years, I was tossed to and fro, playing the bridge between cultures and generations with little to no visible shrinking of those gaps in conflict. In addition to that, I also experienced one of the most heartbreaking incidents in my life, a miscarriage on Mother's Day, 2015. When I was exhausted and started to doubt my skills and energy for ministry while dealing with my own grief of loss, I received a call from then Aurora District Superintendent Reverend Dick Wisdom who relayed the message that the Bishop was sending me to a place called the United Methodist Church of Geneva.

In the reading from the gospel of Matthew today, we step into the story of the disciples who have been in ministry with Jesus. They had just heard of the tragic death of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, and without the time to grieve, Jesus was bombarded with a large crowd who pressed on Jesus to keep teaching and preaching and then the five thousand, not counting the children and women, were hungry so Jesus fed them all with his disciples with the five loaves and two fish. Exhausted, Jesus retreats to a mountain alone while he strongly insisted his disciples go ahead of him on a boat to the other side. Move on to the next thing, Jesus says!

Well, after clearing up with the DS the fact that it wasn't Lake Geneva, I learned that the church I visited just the day before for a meeting with Bill Obilil and the Bishop was the church I was being appointed to. After all that I had heard during my tour around the church building with Bill, I had just told John, my husband who drove me to this meeting that this church was an amazing church. I told him that this church would be one of those great exclamation marks I would be lucky to have right before retirement. Who knew I would be blessed in ways I would not have even imagined. I remember asking the DS, "Are you sure you called the right person for this position? Are you sure you're telling me of the right church?" I thought to myself, "This appointment could NOT be possible for me. How would I be able to preach in such a large congregation on a regular basis? How would I have enough skills to do ministry in such a church?" That was the story 5 years ago. Oh ye of little faith Jesus says... Now that you know the story of my humble beginnings, would you say I walked on water? I'd say yes!

Since the end of February when we made the announcement of my July appointment change to Christ UMC in Deerfield, I have been bombard with your emails, text messages, phone calls, and cards, kind of like the Dursley's from the Harry Potter books where they could not get away from all the invitations he was getting from Hogwarts. As I was reading each of your messages, I realized, "indeed I walked on water!" I preached to you on a regular basis, taught classes and shared what I knew, walked with many of you to the darkest valleys and the highest mountains, and waded in dangerous waters, crossed the rivers, and rode with and against the current on a boat with you. We faced the sunny days and the stormy days, driest of dry days and we may have gotten dirty, wet and even soaked to the deep in many cases.

We jumped for joy together as we worshiped, welcomed staff transitions, successful rehabs and surgeries, weddings, new births including my 2 girls, anniversaries, baptisms, confirmations, graduations, my ordination, new members and so much more... while we also wept together through staff changes and members moving way, burying of babies, children, friends, siblings, parents and grandparents. We fed the hungry together through potlucks and Third Tuesday Suppers, clothed the homeless and cared for the sick, visited the shut ins, provided for the children in the intercity of Chicago, we spoke out for the voiceless and supported and stood with communities who were being oppressed. Then still tirelessly we followed what Jesus asked us to do together within the church.

We stood through difficult storms together... visioning and revisioning, financial struggles and changes of climate, social and political uncertainties, structuring and restructuring of youth programs, General Conference 2019, a pandemic, and more... As I walked on water throughout my ministry here at UMCG, so did you and you still are!

In the midst of storms UMCG, you continue to look to Jesus from anywhere he appeared and you boldly asked, can we come out to you? Can we come where you are? Even if it meant doing what others see as difficult and even impossible, when it was an unpopular and abnormal thing to do... you stepped out of the boat during the storm to where Jesus was standing.

Among differences of viewpoints and opinions, when it would have been easier to huddle with those of the same viewpoints and separate, you stepped out of that comfort zone and chose to worship together. You stepped out of the boat and walked towards Jesus. When we pastors thought to restructure the youth ministry and start over, you said, YES WE CAN, as parents and volunteers came forward, invested in focusing on the youth, and children of your church and community. When our denomination was shaking and struggling to welcome those of the LGBTQ brothers and sisters, you said,

YES WE CAN, and you loved and welcomed and some have made this church a home! When some churches think impossible to fully support and love those of a different culture, you said YES we can and you sure did embrace her and her family. You as a church not only looked to Jesus who was outside of the boat, you boldly asked to go closer to Jesus, even if it meant taking the step out of the boat during a storm and then you walked on water! Not only did you as a church take risks in ministry the last 5 years, you did what was not popular or normal, you defied the odds and you continue to be the church regardless of the physical boat even being there... during this pandemic. You are continuing to give, love, care, pray, worship, and grow in your faith while reaching out to those in need in your community and around the world.

As I thought long and hard about what to preach for my last sermon, I chose Matthew 14, the story of Peter walking on water because it is special to me. Not only was this scripture passage the one I preached on as one of my first sermons here with you but also it was the one I preached on for my first ever sermon; with the help of Pastor Melissa Early who was my first mentor as I started the ordination process and her church in Waukegan as she welcomed me to experience what it's like to preach in a church. I think I came far from that as I celebrate 10 years of full time ministry this year!

So my last words for you as I conclude my ministry at UMCG is this: Keep stepping out! As Peter in Matthew chapter 14 teaches us today, storms come and fear is normal. Jesus even names it as he comes near to the boat. "Do not be afraid" but when Peter could have done what the other disciples did in fear, to huddle in the boat, worry, and run to and fro with not much they could actually do in the boat, he looked to Jesus and dared to go closer to Jesus, even if it meant getting out of the boat during the storm. He teaches us that when we focus our gaze on Jesus we walk on water but when we focus on the storm we start to sink. He teaches us that it is not gravity or a system, or an idea we trust. We trust in the person of Jesus, the savior of our lives, the creator of our being, the everlasting presences of the Spirit. We learn that when we step out, not for the sake of just stepping out but to be closer to Jesus and be bold about it, we experience what seems impossible.

And we are assured that even if we do lose focus on Jesus and start to feel fear again, Jesus is right there with us ready to immediately grab us by the hand. Could we ever fail and sink if we always keep our focus on Jesus?

In the biblical context, the sea stood for what is unpredictable and dangerous. Even though it was a place that provided resources to live on, the sea represented uncertainties, challenges, and chaos. This story of Peter walking on water was particular in that this was really the only time Jesus had sent his disciples away, insisting they go into

uncertainty alone and promised only to reunite with them on the other side. It was definitely a great set up in that it was late when Jesus insisted they get in the boat and to travel to the other side and because most of the disciples were fishermen, they must have been suspicious of what could happen in the sea in the night. But they went anyway. They followed Jesus' instructions and that opened them up to experiencing the impossible, and greater yet, Peter who stepped out further experienced what only he and Jesus is able to share, the experience of walking on water, the impossible!

God leads us in this time of transition of pastors and God leads us in this time of transition in the global pandemic. What the global church will become, what UMCG will be come, what this pastoral transition will bring, we do not know for certain and the normal response can be fear. But we step forward, out to where Jesus is...we dare to go where Jesus leads and we dare to get closer to Jesus even in the midst of uncertainties. We know that when we focus on Jesus we have hope for an experience we cannot even imagine, something impossible we would achieve if we take risks and follow Jesus even if it means getting out of our comfort zone and doing what is not popular or normal.

Let's face it, Jesus usually calls us to step outside of ourselves, our own capabilities, and abilities so that God can achieve more with us. Jesus usually calls us, not from inside the boat but from the storm on the outside of the boat. And when all is done and the storms cease as they usually do, we don't remember what happened or how it hurt, but what changed in us, who we were with, who we are, and who we have become. Let's continue to step out boldly towards Jesus as we still are church together, you and me, no matter where we are.

It has been a joy to see your generosity throughout my ministry here at UMCG. You know how to give of yourself and your treasures and this church has been a good witness to what it means to be good stewards of all that God has entrusted to us. You have the privilege in joining Jesus in all he is doing within the church, in our community and around the world by giving through this church. Please be prayerful about how you can partner with us in ministry through your giving by going to our website, by texting, or mailing in your giving. As always, thank you for your generosity!

As we continue in worship through the last hymn and sending forth, join me in prayer for the gifts dedicated to God.

God, giver of all good and perfect gift. We take time to acknowledge that all that we have is yours entrusted to our care. Help us to grow in our stewardship of all the blessings around us and in our generosity to give to you and our neighbors. Give us open hands that are as willing to give as we receive. In Jesus name. Amen.

**Pastor Esther Lee**