



Walking on Water

Forest Home Chapel, Sermon, Lee Bailey July 13, 2014

What does it mean to walk on water? What does this extraordinary, paradoxical religious image suggest? Water is in us and we are in the waters. Earth's deep waters flow in a vast supply that supports our climate and life. The average percent of water in an adult body is about 50 to 65% water, more in infants. 70% of Earth's surface is covered by the salty oceans. But less than one percent of earth's water is available as fresh water to support humans, and not all that is clean. We are already IN water, water is in us, and without it we would not be. It is essential to our existence and more: Jesus spoke poetically of *living waters* and the *waters of immortality*.

In the biblical account of Jesus and Peter walking on stormy water, Jesus has extraordinary powers, and invites Peter to trust it, and when Peter's faith fades and he begins to sink, Jesus raises him up (Matt. 14: 23-33). The stormy waters are an image of troubled times. I see two ways to interpret Jesus' walking on water.

1. First if we see the earth as completely separated from the transcendent divine, then Jesus can be read as having divine control over a separate earthly realm of ordinary waters. Jesus then brings divinity to the notion of water as a natural object.

2. But I prefer to see the story as the ancients did for millennia, with more depth and mystery. If we see the divine as present in the world as the Holy Spirit, then Jesus is a powerful concentration of divinity in human form, but not separate from the waters. He is part of the ever-present divine in nature. He is *one* with the sacred force in the waters. He does not bring holiness to water, since it is already there, so of course he can walk on water and perform miracles. In this view, the sacredness of the waters is so powerful that it can raise us all up from life's stormy troubles. We can doubt this power to raise us up, or learn to trust the divine in the world during times of stormy turmoil and can be lifted up and saved by it. Sacred waters can raise us up above turmoil.

In poetic imagery coming from this great divine mystery, the Holy Spirit is *in* the world, so walking on water is allowing the deeper, far more powerful sacred Force to lift up our souls, to raise us above the stormy tumults. Jesus teaches faith in the depths to raise souls above fear, anger, and conflicts. We can walk on water when we have faith in the sacred depths to guide us to the higher ways. When we feel overcome, drowning in pain, anger, or grief, the Lord can lift us up. Jesus can raise us above life's stormy waves to peaceful confidence in harmony with God's greater forces, take our hands and lead us back to the security of the boat. ["You raise me up to walk on stormy seas."]

This "raising up from turmoil" image points to a complex spiritual path, to letting go of ego's habitual "I can do it myself" patterns of dealing with the world's storms, to find paths of trust, peace and security in the divine depths of soul in the world. Walking on water is an image of letting God guide us and save us from disaster, rather than causing troubles such as social abuse, prejudice, global warming, and war.

So walking on water is a biggie – it is a major image of being spiritually raised above the storms of life by having trust in the divine presence that calms the soul and social conflicts. Walking on water emerges in prayer, meditation, community nurturing, peacemaking, forgiveness, and caring for nature. Jesus' extending a helping hand in the stormy sea is a gesture of Empathy.

Empathy can give us a glimpse into how others feel – fearful and wounded, or loving, and secure. Often this is communicated in non-verbal language, such as facial or bodily expressions – sinking, limping, crying, laughing, hugging, or smiling. But Empathy is deeply rooted in our unconscious, so sometimes we cannot be sure how someone else feels, thus we may need to ask *how* they feel and what they need. Similarly, with animals and plants, we should learn their dynamics to avoid assuming mistaken Empathy with them.

One kind man was visiting Africa and felt Empathy for the wild animals. He approached some elephants in the wild, and one came toward him with its large ears outspread. Not knowing that this was a threatening sign for an elephant, he did not flee, until he was almost trampled. Empathy needs to be brought to consciousness in learning, hopefully leading to peaceful relationships.

Once a rebellious, angry foster teenage girl stole some of her foster mother's jewelry. The mother found it at a pawn shop, but she did not accuse the girl. Rather, she showed her how to *walk on water*: she lovingly gave the girl one of the jewelry pins as a gift, and the girl broke out in tears. Love is a powerful aspect of Empathy, an uplifting bond, a priceless treasure. (DVD: Bain, Barnet, Dir. *The Lost and Found Family*, Mrs. Hobbes House Production, 2009, with Ellen Bry.)

Empathy is a complex force deeper than separateness, so it can appear in many forms, human, animal, or all of nature.

It is a widespread, largely unconscious dynamic, and only awaits our welcoming it into consciousness. Teachers in schools are now teaching Empathy by bringing babies and their mothers into elementary classrooms and asking the children what they think the baby feels. Kids love it and learn from it how to walk on water, how to be lifted up by sacred Empathy. Religions teach Empathy, but one does not have to be formally religious to feel

and share Empathy; it is very natural. But the more we learn about it, the easier it comes to consciousness.

Increased Empathy, more sensitivity, understanding, and feeling for how others feel, even bonding, can lead to more sympathy and compassion. Empathy underlies authentic bonds and relationships, for it is a gift of the Holy Spirit in nature. Empathy appears easily among humans, especially in families, and with animals -- pets or wild, but also in the rest of nature, as in splashing under a waterfall.

One summer day on vacation a young boy got the idea that he wanted to go fishing, so his Dad got tackle, they went to a lake and cast in a fishing line. The child got bored waiting, and went splashing along the shore. Dad caught a little fish, so the son ran back, but took one look and complained empathetically: "Oh, no! You killed it!" So Dad quickly unhooked it and placed it back in the water, explaining that many fishers catch for sport and then return the living fish back to the water. This little boy was walking on the waters of Empathy, feeling what we share with other animals.

When you are in any situation, ask yourself, what is the Empathy here? Grief in a hospital, fear at seeing a flood, joy seeing a friend, harmony with beautiful nature, awesome wonder at a star-filled sky. Ask: how can I contribute positively to it? Walk on Water. Let yourself be raised up. Act accordingly. If someone is in grief, it is best NOT to say "I know how you feel." To avoid intrusiveness, it is better to offer a hug or say: "That must be sad." If needed, extend a helping hand and help raise others up.

As we extend Empathy to more animals, for example, we learn that "beef is the king of water use" because in industrial ranching, every pound of edible beef demands *two thousand* gallons of clean drinking water. This is a growing problem with population increase, droughts and water pollution. And many of us eat more meat than we need for our daily protein, leading to the medical problems of ingesting too much animal fat. Thus we are seeing a rise in Empathy in animal rescue farms, a decrease in meat consumption, and opposition to abusive, filthy factory farms. By eating less meat we can raise our own health levels and lift the animal nation above the storm of massive industrial meat production.

Empathy is deeply rooted in God's creation, and is archetypal: that is ancient, instinctive, psychological, collective, and spiritual. Empathy is not just sweet and sentimental icing on the facts. Empathy gives us heart-felt meaning. What would it be like to live without Empathy? No feeling for each other? No one helping others rise above the stormy waters of life? It would be a cold, barren, and horrible world of calculating cynics in constant power struggles. But it's amazing, you know, our faith teaches us how to cultivate positive Empathy, to overcome stormy nightmares, and walk on *living waters*.

Empathy arises in large fields – natural, social, spiritual, psychological; it is not contained in a theoretically subjective psyche. When you watch a drama and weep or laugh, you are not just inter-subjectively "identifying" with a character or theme "out there." Your soul participates in the empathic field of the drama that brings it out the collective unconscious. Common theatrical themes such as parent-child conflict express

these struggles in too many families, and thus we have a large empathic field of stories of broken families.

Traditional songs open empathetic paths to religious themes: ["Oh, Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining; it is the night of our dear Savior's birth."] Archaic people commonly see deceased ancestors as reincarnated in the environment: they see ancestors in newborn babies, animals, and nature. One Native American looked up said: "That mountain has spirit," feeling Empathy with massive archaic strength.

Empathy is everywhere! Through heroes such as Luke Skywalker in "Star Wars," young people can empathetically participate in the dramas of growing up, gaining courage, and learning about the mystical Force ["Da-ta-da-da"]. In the film "Grease," Sandy and Danny portray an empathetic path into dramas of growing up from youthful innocence to authentic romance ["Sandy!"]. That's Empathy.

The film "Avatar" portrays our technological culture's conflict between materialistic, aggressive exploitation of nature with high-tech machines, versus the positive empathetic divine forces of the mystery, beauty, and love of a sensitive, threatened nature spirituality. A lot of Empathy is recognized on this magical planet where warriors bond with and fly on dragons, and a goddess – tree can resurrect dead heroes and heroines, sharing Empathy from beyond the mysterious veil of death.

Even logical and scientifically-oriented people, trained to control their feelings in their work, can still feel Empathy; Albert Einstein said: "Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile." Artists and mystics commonly feel Empathy easily and intensely, like Mozart or Roberta Flack.

My younger sister died prematurely of cancer, and Rev. Dolch very graciously led the funeral. Two weeks later, my grief was relieved when in a dream my sister was presented to me by a high school friend who had also died years before. No words were needed. I saw empathetically in my sister's face the message: "I had nothing to worry about." When we listen, recognize, and feel, we can see more deeply, beyond barriers, into the *living waters* (in ourselves and the world) through Empathy, even in dreams. Feeling this Force, we can walk on stormy waters.

Empathy lifts the soul out of its imagined isolation into a wider world. It returns us, especially on waves of emotion, to a deep, powerful ocean in which we constantly float, even if we are oblivious to it. Opening ourselves to these living waters, we feel bonds with people, animals, nature, and great mysteries, even the mystery of life after death. These soulful feelings float up from the deep unconscious soul in the world, in religious traditions, family, poetry, music, art, love, and dreams. Empathy is a vast nourishing field of our existence, filling life and earth with wonder and beauty. And in intense moments of love, faith, and awakening, we can be raised up and *walk on stormy seas* through God's gift of Empathy.