

## **Not waving, but drowning**

We all get too far out sometimes; too far from a place of comfort, from the bedrocks that provide us a feeling of safety, sometimes so far that we don't know how to get back.

This happened to me once, quite literally, and I will never forget it. My first time in Hawaii we went to the beach one day – as you do in Hawaii. The 17 year old exchange student my parents had taken in that year decided to go swimming out far. The waves started picking up and my parents got worried. Never fear, said I. I shall swim out to him and tell him to come back in. After all, I go swimming every morning in a pool in London. How different can the surf here be? No, I did not grow up near the ocean – would you ever guess? Honestly. So, out I swam. And the waves picked up and got worse and worse. Pretty soon I was being tossed around as if I was in a washing machine. Even when I could finally determine which way was up, I barely got to the surface to get a breath of air when the next wave spun me round again. I was tired, I had no air, I thought for a while that I really had gone too far and I was not going to make it back. Shore seemed very far away. Obviously, I did make it back, but I have never had the same enthusiasm for going out in the waves again.

We can also get too far out metaphorically; too many commitments, too many obligations, too far from family and friends, too everything – suddenly what started as enthusiasm becomes stress and even panic. As some of you in the congregation will well know, the past few months; since April

really, have been heavy months for me. A lot going on at work, with my family, with my house. While I could go into the details (and it is tempting because it would pad out the sermon and maybe even gain me some sympathy), that is not really the point. The point is, somewhere around mid-May, I found myself in crisis. Every time I thought things had got about as difficult as they could be, something else happened and I found that more difficult was, indeed, not only possible, but reality.

So during that month of very trying times, as people asked me how I was, my ready quip was “ Not waving, but drowning”, which inevitably got a smile, if not a chuckle and at least once an out and out guffaw.

The line comes from a favourite poem of mine penned by the British poet Stevie Smith, which is called, as you may have already guessed, “Not waving, but drowning” and goes:

*Nobody heard him, the dead man,  
But still he lay moaning:  
I was much further out than you thought  
And not waving but drowning.*

*Poor chap, he always loved larking  
And now he's dead  
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,  
They said.*

*Oh, no no no, it was too cold always  
(Still the dead one lay moaning)  
I was much too far out all my life  
And not waving but drowning.*

How many of us can relate to this feeling?

And, while it was, as I say, a ready quip sure to get a smile, therein lay the grain of truth -- it was actually how I felt. There I was smiling and laughing and going on with things -- waving, as it were -- and, yet, I genuinely was drowning.

It was during this time that I gained insight into the resources that are at hand; resources of faith, inner resources, and resources of community. And I have been awed by their plenty in the same way that the disciples are awed by the bounty of fishes and loaves that are miraculously bestowed upon them in time of need.

I can imagine just how depleted the disciples must have felt when, after a long day of working and healing with Jesus, they looked at their meagre rations, then at the crowd and came to the quite reasonable conclusion that it was just not possible to satisfy everyone's hunger. Taking a break and giving everyone the chance to go to the villages and find something to eat is, on the surface, the obvious thing to do. It took the faith of Jesus to know that God would provide and that the resource would be there to offer everyone their fill. Five thousand people were satisfied with two fish and five loaves of bread. And there were even leftovers! The leftovers should not be ignored. The resources needed were there – and more, because there was faith and trust.

Again, this is the reading of the story on the first level. It is also worth noting that Jesus went to this place and performed a day's worth of healing upon hearing of the gruesome end of John the Baptist. It is not explicitly stated that Jesus left to go to the desert place because of John's death, but I, personally, find it hard to believe that hearing the news made no impression on him. This was a man who baptised Jesus, whom Jesus may have even followed for a while before beginning his own ministry. This was a fellow human being – beheaded on a whim. How could anyone feel after hearing that? I can never know, but I can project. I would feel sickened by the callousness of the act, I would feel devastated at my own loss and the loss of the world of someone with influence and purpose, and, if I daresay, I would feel scared if I were in the same vocation as the one who so recently met his demise.

For me, there is no question that Jesus must have felt discouraged and empty when he set off for the desert place. And if he was looking for peace and quiet to 'recharge', well, it just didn't seem like there was that possibility. People followed him. And, faced with multitudes who needed healing, he did not say "I have had enough, I am low, I cannot do this". He just did it. He must have known that he would be provided the inner resource to do what needed to be done, just as he knew that he could just keep breaking those loaves until everyone was fed – and there would still be more.

During that same time period, I started having a recurring dream. While I often remember my dreams and find them a fascinating window into the thought process, I don't often have recurring ones. This one came often enough that I recounted it to a friend and amateur dream analyst. The dream came in many guises, but the basic premise was always the same; I would have carelessly left my handbag somewhere and someone would take either the whole thing or my wallet. I would then spend the rest of the dream fretting about how much I had really lost (money, cards, papers, etc) and blaming myself for being so careless as to have invited such a loss. I started looking for parallels in my life and, sure enough, my car was broken into and a GPS stolen (that wasn't even mine to begin with, by the way). I also hired a new cleaning lady who stole not only food, but many precious stones from my jewellery box.

"Ah ha!" I would say to my friend. It is because everybody is out to take things from me. This is obviously it. And then I could get

depressed and angry about it and go further out into the water. And so it went.

Until one day I had a different dream. And it was, apparently, so striking that I called the same friend to tell her about it. “I had a really funny dream last night”, I said. “ This time, I was in a shop and there was some really un-useful, but wonderful art thing – it was like a sculpture or something (I can’t even remember what exactly this amazing thing was) – and I wanted it desperately. I knew I couldn’t possibly have the money for it, but I asked the price anyway. When the lady told me, it was even more than I imagined. I felt awful. For some reason, the frivolousness of it meant a lot and I really wanted to buy whatever that thing was. I joked with the sales person and said “well, I’ll just see how close I can get” and I opened my wallet only to find that I had the money necessary – and then some. I bought the thing and presumably lived happily ever after with it, because that was the end of the dream.

My friend clapped her hands and said “I am so pleased. You have finally started to believe in your own inner resources!” Apparently, the whole time I had been telling her about the stolen handbag dreams and taking them quite literally, she had seen another meaning. She could see that I just couldn’t believe that I had strength that I needed, and that I was also feeling the blame of losing it. And she saw the turning point of when something inside me finally started to believe. I cannot honestly say I know what brought about that change. I know I was praying pretty hard the whole time and, perhaps I just started to see the light at the end of

the tunnel. Or perhaps, the dream and the vision of a friend was the answer to my prayers. I don't know if I will ever know or if it even matters what brought it about, what matters is that that point came when I could start to believe again.

Even with strength, faith, and belief, none of us is an island and there are times when we need to go beyond what our inner resource can provide and turn to the strength of community. Nancy Evans spoke a few weeks ago of her gratefulness to this community during a time of need and I must echo her sentiment. During this time, there were some things I could just not do alone. I was just barely keeping it all together, planning and implementing an event at work that was new, risky, highly visible, and that had not been an easy sell. For me to retain any credibility in my still relatively new position, this event had to be at least not a failure. Not many people believed in it. Some were still supporting me, but most were keeping a distance – you know how it is – in case it really bombed, they would not be affected by the shrapnel. So, I was feeling a little alone in this venture.

As I was working in the preparation weeks building up to the event itself, what I perceived to be the worst thing that could possibly happen, happened. My babysitter quit. I will pause a bit here because you may not realise what this means in my life. My balance of life, quite literally, hangs on having a reliable babysitter. Someone I can count on to make sure that Henry is safe in the times I can't be with him. Someone who makes sure that his life carries on calmly when mine is rocketing out in all directions. Like many of us, I have no family in Belgium and no friends who are in

the neighbourhood. So, I hire someone. And over the years I have had many caregivers. This year we had a good one. A great one. But, then, in the end, like so many others, there is no tie but money and she had a reason to leave us. We don't know why and probably never will, but she left – on very good terms, by the way. By sheer coincidence an occasional babysitter I had been using had just given recently given me a call to say she was looking for more work. I called her back. She was happy to take up where the other had left off. I breathed a sigh of relief. Alas, it was shortlived.

This sitter and I went through dates and times and rates and she assured me that all was well. Then, on the first day she actually started to work, she told me she wanted more money and that she couldn't really work the days she promised she would. I lost confidence and wanted to fire her on the spot, but was so worried about the week of this event during which I could absolutely not manage on my own that I thought she would be better than nothing. So I kept her.

However, in one of those funny coincidences that may or may not be coincidence, Linda Tylke wrote a note that evening to our Saturday book group with the logistics of the week. I opened my e-mail, looked at the address list and thought “well, if I can't ask for help here, where can I?” In the depths of my feeling of solitude I sent an e-mail. I phrased it carefully so as not to sound to desperate, so that no one would feel an obligation, but that if anyone thought they could help, it would be welcome. I didn't want to be a burden to anyone or ask too much. I took a deep breath and then pushed the send button.

To my amazement, I had a call within 30 minutes with an offer of help for a couple of the days. Before too long, I had the four days I needed covered.

There is no way for me to express how much this meant to me. No matter how much I thanked these ladies, they didn't seem to understand just how much they had done for me. The women, who covered these four days for me whether they realise it or not, in some way, saved my life.

This made me think of a passage from one of my favourite books by John Ortberg "Everyone's normal till you get to know them", which reads:

*There is a little museum on Nantucket Island devoted to a volunteer organisation formed centuries ago. In those days, travel by sea was extremely dangerous. Because of the storms in the Atlantic along the rocky coast of Massachusetts, many lives would be lost within a mile or so of land. So, a group of volunteers went into the life-saving business. They banded together to form what was called the Humane Society.*

*These people built little huts all along the shore. They had people watching the sea all the time. Whenever a ship went down, the word would go out, and these people would devote everything to save every life they could.*

*They did not put themselves at risk for money or recognition, but only because they prized human life. To remind them what was at stake, they adopted a motto:*

***You have to go out, but you don't have to come back***

*This doesn't sound like a very catchy little recruiting slogan, does it? But it was.*

*It is fascinating to read accounts of people would risk everything – even their lives – to save people they had never met.*

After a while professionals like the US Coast Guard took over the task of rescue and after a time of working side-by-side, eventually, the volunteers stopped sending out teams to rescue drowning people.

*Yet, a strange thing happened: They couldn't bring themselves to disband. The life-saving society still exists today. The members meet every once in a while to have dinners. They enjoy one another's company.*

*They're just not in the life-saving business anymore.*

*You and I are in the life-saving business. We don't always see it, because we can be blinded by our self-preoccupation, but people around us have little mini-shipwrecks every day: a friend gets chewed out by her boss, a child fails in school, a wife fights with her husband and gets a little more disappointed in her marriage, a*

*co-worker makes foolish financial choices, a high school girl doesn't get asked to the prom, somebody at church gets caught in a lie – or someone's babysitter quits at the worst possible moment*

I love that passage because it reminds us that we are part of a community. Not only can we rely on that community when we are in times of trouble – but we have a responsibility to that community to pay attention and to be watching the troubled waters in case there is a ship-wreck, so that we can be there to help save lives when we can. Because saving a life can often take so little, we each have the power within us to do it.

All we have to do is turn to a neighbour and say “I only have two fishes, but I shall give you half, so that you will not be hungry” and we will find that we have enough to feed thousands.

As an interesting corollary to this, I just want to add that this very sermon is testament to all that I have been saying. When approached to do this, I was, of course, flattered, but also overwhelmed. I have not yet come up for air from all the other things that have happened and there was no time I could foresee when I could possibly sit down and reflect enough to prepare something worthy of this congregation. My first reaction, I have to admit, was “I just can't handle this, Lord, I only have two fishes and five loaves (or, in common parlance, 24 hours in the day and so many other deadlines). Feeding 5,000 is an impossibility.”

However, I knew that if Pastor Murray asked me, he had been inspired to do so. He must have had some faith (and he hasn't called to check up, so he must be very faithful!). Somehow, I would have the strength of faith, the inner resource, and the strength of community around me to make it happen.

So, here I am. And if I have said anything that you have found worthy or thought-provoking, you will know from whence it has come and may be grateful with me.

As a very final note, I wanted to add that a dear friend [who is here today – and will surely benefit from a coffee cup later] decided to come at the last minute to Brussels from London this week and brought me a lovely gift of relaxing bath-bombs. Bath-bombs, if you don't know them, are these big balls of herbs and odors and "stuff" that fizz in the bath and relax you. She must have known that I needed them, but what, I wonder, led her to choose one that was called "Waving, not Drowning"?

I shall leave you with that to ponder as we go into prayer:

Dear Lord,

Thank you so much for providing us much more than we believe we have in terms of inner strength so that we can renew and fortify our strength of faith. We thank you for providing this community of support and love and strength that will help each of us in times of need. And please, Lord, give us the humility to be able to ask for help when we need it and to accept it when it is offered. Help us to be vigilant of the ship-wrecks that may be happening around us, even when those who are drowning are desperately trying to convince us they are waving. In your name, we pray. Amen.

Dear Lord,

We thank you for the blessings you grant us each and every day and we are grateful for the support you provide us in times of need. Please be with us now and grant us patience to know that somehow you will answer all the spoken and unspoken prayer concerns each of us has today.

In your name we pray with the words your Son taught us so long ago;

Our Father...

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