

Rejoice! The River is Here!  
"Riding the Rapids"  
Luke 8:22-25

Dr. J. Howard Olds  
September 5, 2004

Have you the desire to follow Jesus? Have you the courage to follow to Jesus? Have you the faith to follow Jesus? That is what we would like to talk about today on our way to Holy Communion.

When it comes to whitewater rafting, my experience is limited, but I have been there and done that. My first excursion was on the Ocoee River with a busload of teenagers who were on a choir tour. I could see the look on the guide's face as I settled into her boat. It was like 'What did I do last night to deserve this nerd today?' Nevertheless, I was there and she was stuck with me. After getting us settled into the raft, she gave us a few instructions on how to row. Then she looked at me and said, "No one in your spot on the raft ever hangs on for the whole ride, so I hope you are prepared to swim." I replied, "I don't believe in swimming alone, so I hope you are prepared to take the plunge with me." To make a long story short, I stayed in the boat, but I spent a lot of time in the bottom of that raft clinging to my guide's feet.

What could be better on Labor Day weekend than a good boat story? The Bible is full of them. This one told in Matthew, Mark and Luke is short and to the point. It takes desire, courage and trust to ride the rapids of Christian discipleship. Come let us take a closer look.

**IT TAKES DESIRE TO RIDE THE RAPIDS OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP**

You have to want to. *One day Jesus said to his disciples, "Let's go over to the other side of the lake." So they got into a boat and set out (verse 22).*

If you want to ride the rapids, you have to get into the boat. This is no bright, sunny day. There are storms ahead. When the storms of life are raging, we are smart to stick together and hold hands.

In the 1630's, Rembrandt did a painting of this Biblical story entitled "The Storm on the Sea of Galilee." In it, the famous artist etches panic on the faces of the disciples. Two of the disciples are trying to arouse Jesus from sleep. As you look closer you discover something odd. There are 14 people onboard. There should be 12 disciples plus Jesus, which makes 13. What is happening here? Why has Rembrandt painted himself in the boat with the Disciples?!

For centuries a boat has been used to describe the Church. “Tis the old ship of Zion, Tis the old ship of Zion...Tis the old ship of Zion; come on children get on board.” The first time my grandson walked into this Sanctuary, he took one look at this huge pulpit and exclaimed “There’s Poppy’s big boat!” Wouldn’t you like to ride the rapids of Christian Discipleship with Jesus as your guide?

C.S. Lewis says, “Our Lord, finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us.”

Carl Sandberg says, “There is an eagle in me that wants to soar and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud.” And so the question today is, do you want to sit on the bank making mud pies or do you want to ride the rapids with Jesus Christ?

### **IT TAKES COURAGE TO RIDE THE RAPIDS OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP**

*Verse 23: A terrific storm came up suddenly on the lake. Water poured in, and they were about to capsize. They woke Jesus. “Master, Master, we are about to drown.”*

Master, the tempest is raging, the billows are tossing high  
The sky is o’er shadowed with blackness. No shelter of  
help is nigh. Carest Thou not that we perish? How can  
You lie asleep? When each moment so madly is threatening,  
a grave in the angry deep?

An experienced whitewater rafter describes the trip this way: *The sound precedes the fury on the whitewater river. You hear the rapids before you see them. A distant, steady hiss grows to an ominous low pitch howl. Then as the current accelerates and the riffles boil into wild white surf, the howl stirs to a deafening roar. Suddenly the raft plunges four feet into the swirling abyss, bounces to the right, then plummets sideways over another ledge and slams into a boiling white hydraulic. It is time to hold on for dear life!*

Sometimes it is hard for us to remember that Jesus did not come to make us safe, but rather to make us disciples. He did not come to promise us a rose garden; He came to be present with us when the thorns are real. And so He calls us to be courageous discipleship.

In 1955, Rosa Parks took a seat on the front of the bus and refused to give it up to a white man. “When I sat down on that bus that day, I had no idea that history was being made. I was only thinking of getting home after a hard day’s work. But I had made up my mind. It was time for someone to stand up or in my case, to sit down. I felt the Lord would give me strength to endure whatever I had to face. So I refused to move.” It is not always easy to ride the rapids of discipleship.

In 2003, Erica Harold was crowned Miss America. She adopted for her platform “Teenage Sexual Abstinence: Respect Yourself/Protect Yourself” for which she got a lot of criticism in the media. Erica writes, “Many warned me that I might be booed out of classrooms or even have books and pencils thrown at me from hostile students. That has not happened. I took my message to a women’s correctional facility. Most thought I was wasting my time. But the young women heard me gladly and thanked me for coming. ‘We appreciate knowing how to make better choices in the future,’ they said.” Sometimes it is rough on the rapids.

*Psalm 46:1-3 says: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth give way and the mountains fall in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.*

Courage is the strength to stand up when it is easier to fall down. Courage is the desire to maintain integrity when it is easier to look the other way. Courage is staying alive and moving forward when it is easier to feel sorry for ourselves. Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear. John Wayne said, “Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway.” If you want to ride the rapids it will take some courage.

### **IT TAKES TRUST TO RIDE THE RAPIDS OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP**

Getting to his feet, Jesus calms the storm and then asks his disciples “Why can’t you trust me?”

In a Peanuts cartoon Linus asks Lucy how much she trusts him. “I don’t trust you any further than you can throw your blanket,” snaps Lucy. With that, Linus gives his blanket a toss. It goes 3’6”. Lucy trusts me exactly 3’6”, concludes Linus.

Augustus Gordon spends six months each year in a solitary cabin deep in the Smokey Mountains above Liberty, Tennessee. The remaining six months he travels around the world preaching the gospel. One day a seeker asked Gus, “Could you define the Christian life in a single sentence?” Gus replied, “How about a single word? The word is **trust**; how far do you trust God?”

Brennan Manning is a monk and recovering alcoholic who writes books for scarred and struggling Christians. In his book Ruthless Trust, Manning says, “I was seeking understanding from my spiritual director when she said to me, ‘You don’t need anymore insights into the faith. You have enough insights to last 300 years. The most urgent need in your life is to trust what you have received.’ That remark sent me into a searing re-examination of my life, my ministry, and the authenticity of my relationship with God.”

“The challenge to actually trust God forced me to deconstruct what I had spent my life constructing, to stop clutching what I was so afraid of losing, to question my personal investment in every word I had ever written or spoken about Jesus Christ.”

Ruthless trust is an unerring sense way down deep beneath the surface of agitation, boredom and insecurity of life that it is going to be alright. Ill-winds may blow, more character defects may surface, sickness may visit, and friends will surely die, but a stubborn, irrefutable certainty persists that God is with us and loves us in our struggle to be faithful. Jesus asks all of his Disciples, “Why don’t you trust me?”

The person who trusts God gives God more pleasure than the Westminster Cathedral, the Sistine Chapel, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Van Gogh’s Sunflowers, the sight of 10,000 butterflies in flight, or the scent of a million orchids in bloom. It may mean more to Jesus when we say “I trust you,” than when we say “I love you.”

IF YOU WANT TO RIDE THE RAPIDS YOU HAVE TO GO WITH THE FLOW  
Remember Leut. Dan in that endearing movie Forrest Gump? Leut. Dan had lost both legs in Vietnam. He was angry with God and mad that Forrest saved his life. So he pelted heaven with his hostility, screamed and shook his fist at God. When the tirade finally wound down, Forrest said, “I’m going to heaven, Luet. Dan.” That simple childlike faith helps the crippled and disillusioned Dan make his first move toward his own redemption.

In Isaiah 43:2 *The Lord says, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when you pass through the rivers, they shall not sweep over you. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel. Be not afraid. For I am with you.”* It takes desire, courage and trust to ride the rapids. Are you ready to step out in faith and get in the raft?

So we gather here for Holy Communion. No one of us knows what tomorrow holds. We can only know that God is with us. So will you use these moments to increase your faith, expand your trust, and commune with God who calls us to ride the rapids of Christian Discipleship?