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Sermon Title: Change
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Matthew 14:22-23

Matthew 14:22-23

Immediately he 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

This is the second sermon within a couple of weeks that I've begun by quoting billboards along I-95. Coming south from New Haven, around Orange, is the first one. It says, "When you DIE, you will meet God," and in the background is one of those heart monitors you see in the ICU where the lines go up and down before they flat-line: and you're dead. "When you die, you WILL meet God."

The billboard theologian allows a few miles for that to sink in. Then, around Bridgeport is the next one: "Are you going to heaven or HELL?" With the word "hell" set against the background of hellfire flames. Someone has gone through a lot of effort and money to make us think about the changes we should make before it's too late. Now, you don't have to believe in hellfire and brimstone to believe in change.

I never met anybody who gave up smoking because they didn't want to go to hell. We, me included, gave up smoking because we didn't want to die before our time, and usually because people we love kept hounding us, "Dad!" "Grandma!" "Dear! Please stop! We want you around a long time." So, by hook or by crook, we change. And the simple truth is, hellfire or not, we all need some change.

Today's Scripture lesson is a perfect description of most of us when it comes to our faith life. Good days and bad, ups and downs. Sometimes we're saints, sometimes not.

I have never forgotten my gym teacher at PS 90 in Queens, dragging me in front of the class, announcing to everyone that my father was a Church pastor and then shouting at me, saying, "I don't know how a good man like your father gave birth to a demon like you." Forget the biology of his statement. He was simply recognizing that my 10-year-old personal Christlike life wasn't a straight line. We all mess up.

And St. Peter is a perfect example. He's called "Saint" Peter because more often than not, he got it right. But a lot of time he messed up. He was one of the first Disciples Jesus called. He was the first Disciple to openly declare that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the Living God." He was the only Disciple to try to rescue Jesus when soldiers came to arrest him. And Peter was the Disciple who really led the early Church in the months and years after the Resurrection. But it wasn't all a straight line for him either.

After Jesus was arrested, Peter was the one who denied even knowing Jesus—three times! When Jesus was being crucified, Peter ran away and hid. On Easter, when the women followers declared that Jesus was resurrected, Peter sneered.

But our Scripture story is the best one for our purposes this morning, a picture-perfect example of the ups and downs of faith for even the saints among us. On the occasion of this Bible story, Jesus had worked a particularly interesting miracle, feeding a humongous crowd of people with only a few loaves of bread and some tiny fish. Jesus ends the day telling his Disciples to get into a boat, go across the lake ahead of him, and he'll catch up. So the Disciples head off in the boat. It's a little bit stormy, they're far away from land, they look out across the water, and there is Jesus coming toward them, walking . . . on water! Not swimming, not bodysurfing, Jesus is walking on water! The Disciples are "terrified." They're sure it's a ghost. But Jesus assures them it is he, in the flesh, so to speak.

At which point, the Bible says, the not-yet Saint Peter hops over the side of the boat, lands *on* the water, not *in* the water, *on* the water, and lo and behold, Peter starts "walking on the water."

Throughout Jesus's life, but most especially at the end, he was trying to convince the Disciples that they had the capability to carry on his work, that they were equal to any task, and here was Peter doing exactly what Jesus had done. Something miraculous, something impactful, something supernatural, extraordinary, convincing, faith-inducing, confidence building. Until . . . well, Peter looked down and saw the water, looked all around him, nothing but water and storm, and poor Peter lost it. And he began to sink. Whatever he had, he lost it: faith, confidence, trust. Whatever got him to leap forward in the first

place, whatever change had come upon him to empower him, he lost it. And, the Bible says, "Peter began to sink, crying out to Jesus, "Lord, save me." Peter is the poster boy for messing up, for the very human need to discover lasting change.

I thought today would be a good day to talk about messing up. We've got the men from Pivot House here with us, as we do three times a year: they always close our Dogwood Festival, a powerful ending. Each year they captivate our high school SPF kids who treasure them. And today is their annual Sunday visit, always a highlight.

We've got about, let's say, 36 Pivot House men today. All 36 have messed up their lives, and yet they have the courage to stand up here and stand up in Churches all across Connecticut, every Sunday, up on the altar, as living proof of two things: messing up and fixing up. Call it "sin" and "redemption." Or bad, then good; wrong to right, down then up.

Our Pivot men have the gumption to do three things: No.1, they know they messed up. They admit it. At some point in their lives, they woke up and wanted to change.

Now, that realization comes in different ways. Maybe for one-third of them, it was a spouse, parent, child; some loved one was bold enough to say it out loud, "You've messed up. You need to change. Or else." Maybe for one-third it was the government, the police, the court system, society; an employer; some outside agency, saying, "You've messed up. We don't trust you. Or want you around. You need to change. Or else." And maybe for one-third it was personal, it was waking up one day and saying, "I'm done. I'm going to change. I need help." And here they are with Pivot, with us. Whichever third they are, God bless them. Because that's Point No. 1. They knew they had to change.

No. 2, they entered a long-term program. No easy fix. No shortcuts. You go to Pivot House, you enter a strict, disciplined, Spartan world. You work: course-work, therapy work, physical work, spiritual work, choir practice work. Even being here all morning is work. They're not sleeping in. They're not going to their kids' soccer games. They're here with us for four hours.

I've been a pastor a long time, and I've been helping folks with addiction, abuse issues. And it usually follows a predictable course. You get in trouble. Drug bust. Car accident. Embarrassing incident at a party. And the cops, the family, the boss all come down on your head. At that point, people want help, not change. That is, how do I get out of this mess quickly? They'll promise anything. Do anything . . . as long as it's fast, easy, over and done with. No change.

We're all great with the 24-hour conversion thing. We mess up. We get caught. We're sorry. We feel bad. We'll do better. For 24 hours till the guilt wears off. We don't really want change. We just want the "incident" over. These men may well have tried the quick fix: an altar call at Church, or a one-time A.A. meeting, or a sober house for a week. Not enough. Not enough commitment. Not enough time. Not enough change.

There is a commitment I really admire. It's called "90 in 90." Once you admit you have a problem, once you commit to change, you do 90 A.A. meetings in 90 days. Ninety meetings is a lot of meetings; 90 days is a long time; "90 in 90" says you've made a commitment to change, just like our Pivot men, and that's Point No. 2.

Point No. 3, no hiding. They're up here, facing us, loud and clear, singing their story, telling their story. No hiding, no cover, no excuses. When they sing, well, you heard them. Those lyrics are tough, blunt, honest. They sing about trouble, defeats, shackles, loss, the words echoing their own lives of trouble, deceit, shackle and loss.

So what's the take-away lesson from the Bible story about Peter, and the men from Pivot House? Plain and simple: change is work. Change takes time. Change is a process.

Yes, I know there are sudden conversions like St. Paul killing Christians one day, preaching Christ the next. Such change happens. There are people who turn on a dime, go "cold turkey," and never go back. In my experience, that's about 2 percent of people, maybe less. For most it's a process. But we all need change. Might be change in behavior, change in lifestyle, change in attitude, change in friends, change in perception. If you can't think of something that needs changing, you're not thinking hard enough.

We should use today as motivation. If our Pivot men can take the giant steps they have taken—courageous steps, risky, humbling, costly steps—then how can I stand here myself and not be willing to make some changes?

My TV package includes four religious channels. Big-time mega-Church pastors buy a half-hour, an hour, to give their message. This week I listened to a preacher from Nigeria, and he was good . . . tough, direct, relevant. Nigeria is mostly known for what? Corruption, scams. Like those email scams:

Dear David, I'm writing you because you are world-known as a Christian leader. My late husband was Chief Minister of Finance. He was killed in a car accident. Now I have nothing. He left \$10 million in a bank in Europe. I'll give you \$5 million to do all your great work for Jesus. All you must do is send me \$20,000

to take care of all the fees and bribes necessary. My children are crying. We await your call.

*In Jesus's precious name,
Mary Martha Elizabeth Jones*

I've gotten hundreds of these, and that's just the surface of the corruption that ruins Nigeria and keeps them from prospering.

So this preacher from Nigeria stood tall in his pulpit, preaching about what I'm preaching about: change. And the Nigerian preacher got very specific, going after corruption and cheating and scamming of every kind, high and low. In government, in business. In the neighborhood. At the market. In schools. In marriage. "How do we shortchange others?" he asked. "How do we cut corners? How do we white lie and shade the truth?" And he gave example after example from daily life in Nigeria. Shoddy construction. Bribes and blackmail before anything gets done. Contracts and promises, broken willy-nilly.

What the preacher was doing was begging his Church to do what the Pivot men have done: look deep in their own lives, see where they need to change, and do it. He's trying to rebuild Nigeria from the bottom up, from the inside out, beginning with his own Church members changing themselves. *Changing themselves.*

There are two quotes I love, kissing cousins to each other. One comes from Mahatma Gandhi: "Be the change you wish to see." *Be the change you wish to see.* We all know change we'd like to see in others. We want to see change in politics, in society, in culture, in business practices, in civility, in the media. It's always somebody else we want changed. Gandhi says, "Be that change first, be that change yourself, you start the change now."

Leo Tolstoy said the same thing. "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself." Jesus says the same thing. "You want to take the speck of someone else's eye but ignore the beam in your own." My mother said the same thing. "Every time you point a finger at someone, there are three fingers pointing back at you." In other words, we are Ground Zero for change.

Let me bring the sermon back to Peter and back to us. First, us. How can we change in a way that would make a difference in our daily lives? Our Pivot House men, they aren't curing cancer or conquering outer space or building a business empire—yet. They're starting simple and small: themselves, their daily lives. Start small and focus.

I played baseball for a lot of years. Two things I learned can teach us a lot. As a hitter, like all hitters, I'd go into a slump for a week or two. One month, I'm hitting anything and anyone: singles, doubles, triples. All-star stuff, game after game. Then, all of a sudden, I can't hit anything. What to do?

The Yankees had a Hall of Fame shortstop from my part of Queens, Phil Rizzuto, so I grew up on his advice. He said, "When you go into a slump, when you can't hit, when you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing, and what you know you can do—bunt. Stop swinging so hard, stop swinging for the fences. Bunt. Bunt is the smallest thing you can do in baseball. You break your hitting down to the smallest component: ball hits bat. Period.

As a catcher, you might guess my job was to catch. The pitcher throws the ball; I'm supposed to catch it. Sometimes an infielder or an outfielder has to throw home, and again, I'm supposed to catch it. That's why I was called a catcher. It's easy enough when people throw it chest high. I just put my glove there and catch it. But let's face it, from Little League all the way to Yankee Stadium, all those crazy pitchers and acrobatic infielders and pumped-up outfielders—they throw the ball 90 miles an hour in the dirt, they throw wild to the right, to the left, in the dirt.

What to do? My father taught me what to do. Every athlete has a friend who hates sports but loves to talk. So give your friend a ball, let him talk, standing about 15 feet away, while throwing as hard as he can . . . in the dirt.

When I got to college, that was actually part of practice. I squatted behind home plate while some behemoth would throw as hard as he could in the dirt from 15 feet away. The point? Focus. Blot out everything else. Forget the batter, forget the runner, forget the score, focus on the immediate. On the small thing. On the simple thing. On the one thing. Ball meets bat. Ball goes into glove. One makes you a hitter. One makes you a catcher. Nothing fancy. Most changes you and I want in our lives are that direct. Nothing fancy. Start small. Break it down into manageable pieces. And practice it over and over.

So we'll end with Peter. Big, bad, brash, bold St. Peter. Loved the limelight. Loved to be the "go-to guy." But guess what! He was just like us! Sometimes he walked on water. Sometimes he sank. Sometimes he promised Jesus the moon. Sometimes he denied even knowing him. Sometimes he defended Jesus to the death. Sometimes he fell asleep on the job. One time, Jesus called him the devil. One time Jesus promised to build the Christian Church around him.

He ended up as St. Peter because every time he fell, every time he failed, he was smart enough to cry out, "Lord save me." He was smart enough to know

he needed help. He was smart enough to stick with it long term. He was smart enough to change.

Today, our Pivot House men have inspired us. They've made the decision to change. They're on their way. Good for them. When we leave Church today, maybe we can put a \$10 or a \$20 or a check in the big soup can, and that's good for us.

But the best good would be to take them to heart: they've taken a big step toward change. Let's honor with our own steps. Like Peter, let's not be too proud to cry out, "Lord, save me." And then, let's not be too proud to go small and bunt.

Let's conclude by singing Hymn No. 588, "Have Thine Own Way, Lord":

*Have thine own way, Lord!
Have thine own way!
Thou art the potter,
I am the clay.
Mold me and make me
after thy will,
while I am waiting,
yielded and still.*

*Have thine own way, Lord!
Have thine own way!
Search me and try me,
Savior today!
Wash me just now, Lord,
wash me just now,
as in thy presence
humbly I bow.*

*Have thine own way, Lord!
Have thine own way!
Wounded and weary,
help me I pray!
Power, all power,
surely is thine!
Touch me and heal me,
Savior divine!*

*Have thine own way, Lord!
Have thine own way!
Hold o'er my being
absolute sway.
Fill with thy Spirit
till all shall see
Christ only, always,
living in me!*