

Scripture: Matthew 14:22-33

*Reflection of my experience at Pilgrim Lodge*

Rev. Josh Fitterling

As I mentioned at the beginning of our service today, I want to take just a brief moment at this time to share with you from my experiences over the last week at Pilgrim Lodge. This past week, over 50 high schoolers, who identify as part of the LGBT community – as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and more, as well as a number of straight allies, gathered together to spend the week at Pilgrim Lodge in West Gardiner. And like any other camp week, these young people, got to experience the joys of Lake Cobbosseecontee as they went boating and swimming. They got to hear the loons singing them to sleep at night. They got to hike the trails, enjoy good food, have ice cream, dance, play games, and live together in community. They got to experience what many before them have found at Pilgrim Lodge, which is a new kind of spiritual home. But beyond all these things, beyond the fun and friendships, this camp, this first of its kind camp, offered so much more for these LGBT youth – it offered a lifeline.

For you see, as I am sure many of you already know, life for the LGBT community, especially youth, is often a hard one and there are many statistics that could be shared this morning regarding the struggles and the challenges faced by LGBT youth in our country. We could talk about the fact that approximately 42% of LGBT youth report living in a community that is “not accepting” and that 92% report hearing negative messages about being LGBT. We could talk about the fact that the rate of suicide attempts is nearly 4 times greater among LGBT youth than other youth. But, these numbers seem so much more real when you get to look into the faces of over 50 campers who share their stories of communities that were not accepting. As they share of the hateful messages they have received in life – messages from strangers and from their own families. These number seem so much more real when the campers talk about their challenges and struggles that they have been dealing with. Yes, this camp got real, it got deep as we realized the ways in which the storms of life were impacting their

lives. And as the week progressed and as I was holding our scripture for today with me of Peter sinking and Jesus saving, looking for God to open those words anew in preparation for today, this scripture started coming to life in a new way right before my eyes. It came to life as we realized how many of our campers have been fighting the waves, struggling to stay afloat, hoping for a lifeline to pull them up out of the water.

And then came along Pilgrim Lodge, reaching out. Then came along Pilgrim Lodge, living out their faith in Christ, embodying the Jesus who saved Peter from sinking, as they reached out to this struggling community of teens. Then came along this camp where these young people got to be themselves and feel an unconditional love in a community of such tender support. This camp came along and offered a safe space where the storms could not enter. A space where no one needed to live in fear. Where messages of love replaced those founded in hate. Where sharing could occur, growing could occur, hopes could occur, dreams could occur, healing could occur, love of self could occur. Pilgrim Lodge, came along, embodying the Spirit of Christ, reaching out, and catching those tossed about by the storms of life unique to those in the LGBT community to keep them from sinking. And it is not just this Camp that was reaching, but these kids were reaching too! They lifted one another and pulled them into safety and security. They offered their love and care in beautiful ways to one another that, if for only a moment, provided refuge from the storm. They loved powerfully, loving one another into wholeness and healing, and it was one of the most beautiful things that I have ever witnessed, as they reached out to one another in love.

Now today, on the day after sending these beloved people of God home, I am so grateful for that reaching out of Pilgrim Lodge to this group of LGBT youth. I am grateful that I was able to be a part of it, to love these young people and help to create a space free from the storms of life with feet on solid ground. And yet, on this day after, the hardest part for me is wondering what waves are beginning to stir once more in the lives of these beautiful young LGBT people and allies? What winds are blowing and will they stay afloat? Will the time at Pilgrim Lodge buoy them for what the future

holds? Will the friendships formed offer a new place to reach out to when the storms begin to overwhelm? Will someone else reach out, catch them, create safety for them, and help calm the storm, even if for a moment or for a week?

These questions sit with me and these questions propel me. These questions propel me into the work of the church that our scripture today calls us to do. To be that embodiment of Jesus who, when storms rage and people are sinking, will reach out and pull them up. To be aware of what others are dealing with and catching those who are in danger of being pulled under by the current of life. And, yes, this message does indeed extend beyond the LGBT community, into all the storms that rage and to all who find themselves in peril on the sea of life. But still today, for me, those 50 plus LGBT youth and ally campers are first in my mind and heart, and I pray so hard for them. That the storms of life will not overtake them and that a hand will always be reaching out to catch them. That a hand will always be reaching out to save. Where will you be reaching? Amen.